



Kids Hope Makes a Difference One Child at a Time

by Jonathan Brooks

“By the third grade, teachers typically know which students will make it,” emphasized Barbara Elliott, founder of the Center for Renewal in Houston. “If we can intervene with remedial love, we can provide healing and help undo damage in their lives. Knowing that one adult cares about them makes a profound difference. They can better learn and become more stable.”

Kids Hope helps churches and its members make that life-changing difference.

According to its website, the idea behind Kids Hope is a simple one. One church partners with one local school. Church members who participate in the program mentor one child for one hour per week.

Elliott, who identifies effective faith-based models and looks for best practices, noted that since the inception of Kids Hope 13 years ago, 99% of principals and teachers reported a positive change in the learning and behavior of children who participated in the program. Unacceptable behavior usually decreases within the first year. Academic performance typically increases in the second year.

“Students enjoy the individual attention given to them by the Kids Hope volunteers,” noted Bonnie Clark, Principal of Sinclair Elementary School in Houston. “I think it is a real self esteem booster for our students that someone cares enough about them to take time out of their day to be with them. [Volunteers] form a collaborative partnership with the parents of the students. The teachers develop a relationship with the mentors letting them know what the students’ needs are regarding tutoring. You can see the excitement in the students when they know that the volunteers are coming to see them.”

Elliott added that principals who have participated in the program typically say, “Why wouldn’t I want to have the program in my school? It helps my students and doesn’t cost me anything.” Currently, Kids Hope receives more requests from schools for partners than they do from churches looking for schools with which to partner.

Consistency is an important part of the program. “For the sake of the children, a church’s commitment should be long-term and they should take it seriously,” said Elliott. “It is very damaging when a church or mentor pulls out after a year. If someone wants to be a mentor but cannot meet the time requirements, they can be a prayer partner. Every mentor is assigned a prayer partner. They pray for the mentor and student during the scheduled time.”

Jon Hogg, Community Ministry Coordinator of Buckner Houston asserted that Buckner believes in the program so much that they stake their 128 years of ministry and reputation in this ministry. “We are partnering to help get churches and schools involved. We have a full-time staff person in Dallas to oversee Buckner’s effort to recruit churches for Kids Hope. We see the value of Kids Hope and have committed our time and resources. We will soon have two full-time staff members dedicated to Kids Hope.

“Buckner’s goal is not to do ministry but to help churches get plugged in to doing ministry - to help churches get involved in their community where the needs are the greatest. We [Christians] often overlook the needs of our neighbors and the people just down the street. This is a wonderful opportunity to energize a church and unify its members to make a difference in the local community. At this point, what we really need is churches.”

According to Elliott, there are 189 schools in the Houston Independent School District. Currently, only eight churches in Houston participate in Kids Hope. There are more than enough churches in Houston to meet the needs of all 189 schools.

One of those eight churches is Houston's Lazybrook Baptist Church, which partners with Sinclair Elementary. Pastor John Neesley notes that Lazybrook has been partnering with Kids Hope for about eight years. "Kids Hope has linked us to our community and people outside the church. It has involved us in their lives and needs. Kids Hope has helped give us positive recognition in our community. While walking down the halls of the school, students will say, 'Pastor, John. Pastor, John.' They are as glad to see us as we are them."

Neesley said that Kids Hope is a tool in Lazybrook's community outreach toolbox. It helps put church members outside of the church walls and into the lives of other people. "It's a great program for the life of our church. We get to love our community and be in touch with their needs."

Though mentors are not allowed to directly evangelize students due to laws governing separation of church and state, mentors are able to exhibit God's love to the children and their families. Before a child can participate in the program, parents must sign a statement allowing them to do so. Part of the permission form asks if the parents will allow the child to be invited to church-related events.

"Soon after their child begins the program, parents typically want to know, 'Who is this adult that is having such a profound impact on my child?'" said Elliott. "Frequently, the mentor is also able to minister to the child's family as a result of the relationship."

Neesley noted that sometimes while they are waiting for their moms or dads to pick them up, kids will seek counsel and say, "I've always wanted to ask a pastor this question." Sometimes families will contact the church with their spiritual needs.

"Through Kids Hope, we are able to build authentic relationships with kids and their families and show them the love of Christ."