

# GOING UP

## Education Elevator Partnerships Benefit Professionals and Students

Building confidence, inspiring curiosity, cultivating character—this is the foundation of West Virginia’s Education Elevators (EE) program, and it all started with a man who had a passion for learning. In 2007, Tom McJunkin, a partner at Jackson Kelly LLC and a long-time advocate of education, encouraged the law firm to take its existing partnership with Piedmont Elementary School, located in Charleston, WV, to new heights by implementing an innovative program that would allow staff to mentor students. Tom believed there was no mission more important than the education of our youth and that it is imperative for businesses to take an active role in local education.

The EE program joins together a West Virginia-based business or organization with a local school to create a mutually beneficial partnership. Since its inception in 2007, it has partnered three Charleston schools—Piedmont, Chamberlin Elementary School and Edgewood Elementary School—with three businesses: Jackson Kelly PLLC, Energy Corporation of America and TransCanada PipeLines Limited. Volunteers from the partner organizations, who are referred

to as elevators, mentor students attending the partner schools. Elevators are matched with students based on similar interests and hobbies. The volunteers meet with their assigned student each week on school grounds during regular school hours.

In special circumstances, the relationship between an elevator and their mentee can continue despite student relocations. “One of the greatest features of our program is that when kids are transferred to a different school, which for many of these kids happens fairly often due to things like being transferred to different shelters or a change in guardianship, elevators can continue meeting with their students at the school they have been transferred to,” says Allison McJunkin, executive director of the EE program. “It’s incredibly beneficial for kids who have been uprooted from their friends and teachers at their former school to continue having the stability of seeing their elevator at the new school.”

Research has shown that the presence of a caring adult role model is the most important determinant in who and what a child becomes. Both students and elevators have felt the impact of this unique program. “Since I’ve become an elevator, I’ve met some wonderful people in our community,” says Kelly Weikle, senior communication specialist at TransCanada PipeLines Limited and an EE volunteer. “I’ve also learned so much about the obstacles many

children face day to day, and it has ignited a passion in me to help these kids succeed. There really are no right words to describe what it feels like to make a difference in a child’s life.”

Administrators of the schools involved in the program have noticed a significant impact on their students’ lives. As a curriculum specialist and EE coordinator at Edgewood, Stacey Losh has witnessed that simply giving a child time can make a significant difference. “The children just want someone to talk to and pay attention to them,” she says. “All children crave one-on-one attention, and unfortunately that is very hard to achieve in a school setting. The elevators are providing one-on-one time and undivided attention to children who live in tough situations.”

As EE continues to grow and make strides to create positive relationships in the Mountain State, Allison is on a mission to make sure everyone benefits from the partnerships the program creates. “My goal is to make EE school-business partnerships the rule rather than the exception,” she says. “It’s an economically feasible way for businesses to make real, impactful changes in the lives of the students and schools in their communities, and it also benefits the businesses and the employees who serve as elevators.”

Employees of the EE business partners are able to take their cultivated skill sets out of the office and into the communities, which only enhances the mutually beneficial partnership. “The EE program is a great fit because not only does it afford our employees an opportunity to support education and West Virginia children, but additionally, through the program, the elevators are using skills that apply in the workplace, such as leadership, conflict management, communication and time management,” says Kelly. ■

## Mentors Make a Difference

At-risk young adults who have a mentor are:

**46%** less likely to use illegal drugs

**55%** more likely to enroll in college

**78%** more likely to volunteer regularly

**130%** more likely to hold leadership positions

SOURCES: Mentoring.org, Big Brothers Big Sisters and Breakawayoutreach.com

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