



COMMUNITY CONNECTORS

My name is Jeremy Hollon and I am the current Associate Director of Community Partnerships at Community Refugee & Immigration Services (CRIS) in Columbus. I am here today to request that the Ohio Department of Education's Community Connectors grant be considered for extension. While CRIS is located in Franklin County my testimony today I believe is echoing all 88 counties in Ohio and all those agencies, over 400 state-wide, who have received this grant since its introduction in July of 2015.

Community Connectors is built around the concept of mentoring our state's youth to lead them down appropriate pathways to academic, employment, and social success. The goals of the program are based around the partnerships of the community to benefit our most precious resource; youth. Ensuring that regardless of county size or location all Ohioans have equal opportunity to succeed and find support and role-models to take the next step to self-sufficiency. The phrase "it takes a village" comes to mind, and this grant shows just how effective that can be.

Our program has been fortunate enough to receive funding for three years now and have provided direct mentorship to over 300 middle and high school students attending Columbus or Westerville City Schools, and over 15,000 hours of direct and engaged mentoring. We have witnessed a mentee graduation rate of 90% and have welcomed in students from over 36 countries. But, we know we cannot do it alone which is why we partner and work closely within our schools and community to compliment and not compete with resources and services. We know how overwhelmed our current schools are which is evident in many of their report cards concerning graduation, testing, and attendance. Community Connectors created that partnership and we have been welcomed and supported by every school we have served, and more often than not asked to expand into new districts.



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We also know the importance of those steps after graduation by finding employment or higher education. This year our program will graduate 13 students with the OhioMeansJobs Work Readiness seal and we are hopeful to tailor our programming so by next year all appropriate students will earn this employer recognized credential to further show our students are ready for work. Our students will also be beginning their pathways to Columbus State, Ohio State, Franklin, Denison, Otterbein, and so on and so forth to become the next generation of leaders and doers. We ensure that our students understand financial aid, application processes, and future planning as many of our students will be not only the first to attend college, but many the first to graduate high school. The unknown can be intimidating so we work to bring as much education possible.

Because of this we have also seen a surge in graduated mentees returning to our program as mentors to give back and show their gratitude for someone caring about them. People often discuss cycles of poverty, but we are seeking to create cycles of support and engagement.

We ensure students are meeting their required internship and volunteer hours to graduate while also providing crucial work experience and job exploration to find pathways to success and connect to employers who are seeking qualified candidates. We are the bridge between education and careers.

We have welcomed over 20 employer partners within our program to speak to students about career and industry pathways, how crucial education is, and make the concept of work not scary but something to be excited for. From financial literacy, interviewing skills to appropriate attire we are ensuring our students, at any age, are prepared to meet the demands Ohio presents. Our program in the past 2 years alone has provided over 300 hundred of training by subject matter experts in mental health, suicide prevention, employment readiness, financial literacy, and college preparation directly to our mentors and mentees.



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Community Connectors provides wraparound support to not only youth, but also their families. We know all too well if a parent, or parents, are struggling with work, health and wellness, or housing that sooner or later the weight falls on the shoulders of a child and they have to make a choice; drop out of school and support or push forward. We make sure if a parent needs help we find those resources. As a former employee of Children Services and Job and Family Services of both metro and rural counties I know how beneficial having support can be when making the decision to do good, or start down the path of bad which often led families and youth to seeing the inside of foster-care, jail, or worse. Too many times I would sit with adults who have regretted their current life choices and feel it's too late to get their diploma, GED, and often wish they had positive role models and support in their earlier years. I only wish back then there was a program like this to make referrals to.

Community Connectors is making a difference. Our program brings a positive social experience, for both mentor and mentee. Many of our volunteer mentors are college students, and for many this is the first time they are calling Ohio home. We try to show how welcoming and vibrant our city is so when they finish their own schooling they choose our city over going home, or what they perceive as a larger metropolitan area. On both sides we are making our state stronger.

Imagine if one agency in this state is providing over 15,000 hours of purposeful friendship and getting the positive results we are seeing what the impact of the entire state of Ohio could be.

I ask that this committee looks at the Community Connectors grant and continues to have conversation about its sustainability. Within this testimony I have also provided letters from a Principal and teacher about their experience with Community Connectors. Again, this is just one story within the 16 schools and two districts we serve, let alone other grant recipients spread across the state in counties like Hamilton, Allen, Hardin, Shelby and Ashtabula.

I thank you for your time.



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SPIRIT OF SUCCESS

Mission: Each student is highly educated, prepared for leadership and service, and empowered for success as a citizen in a global community.

March 4, 2019

To whom it may concern:

My name is Kenton "Kenny" Lee and I am the Principal of Columbus North International School. For the past three years, CNIS has partnered with the Community Refugee Immigration Service (CRIS), and through the financial support of a Community Connectors Grant, we have designed and successfully implemented a Mentoring program that has made a tremendous impact on our students and families. What began as an idea on paper three years ago, has grown into a critical student centered program that has been THE determining factor in a large number of our students graduating high school, holding employment, and pursuing an identified career path.

The overwhelming majority of students who participate in our mentoring program are or will be the first high school graduate in their family. Unlike many students across the State of Ohio working towards the same graduation goal, our mentor program students struggle accessing traditional sources of academic information and career guidance, like immediate family or relatives. Our CRIS mentors have become this extended family and information resource as well as a source of motivation for our mentees. In exit survey data of our graduates, our student mentees always identify their CRIS mentor as one of the primary reasons why they graduated high school.

The saying goes, "it takes a village to raise a child." The CRIS mentors and the program infrastructure that support their efforts are important parts of the CNIS village, all working to put our students in the best possible situations to graduate. As an educator and an advocate for at-risk, high needs students, please maintain the Community Connectors Grant and allow CRIS to continue their comprehensive mentoring program for CNIS students. The Grant is literally life changing.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions or if you need more information.

Sincerely,

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March 14, 2019

To Whom It May Concern:

I have nothing but praise for the Community Refugee and Immigration Services (CRIS) mentoring program, funded by the Community Connectors Grant.

In 21 years of teaching in Columbus City Schools, I can say without hesitation that this program is by far the most impressive, far-reaching, high quality program I have encountered. It is just three years old and growing by leaps and bounds. Good news spreads quickly, and as fast as director Jeremy Hollon can thoroughly vet and train committed college students and community mentors, the line for interested mentees grows even faster.

Research supports the positive influence of mentors, and that positivity shines through in many aspects of students' lives. This program keeps students in school and sees them through graduation. This program helps students find and keep good jobs. This program helps refugees and immigrants navigate the many facets of American life. This program helps students improve their English and discover all that Columbus has to offer, from museums to local restaurants to area colleges and universities. In short, this program WORKS.

But you need not take just *my* word for it. The quality and quantity of positive press and publicity this single program has received has been stunning; from glossy magazine spreads to professional videos of mentors and mentees voicing their life-changing experiences (featured at multiple conferences), to rave reviews of the Columbus Nations Cup summer soccer tournament, and much, much more. Corporate professionals, business owners, high school and college students, teachers, administrators, community members rave about this popular program.

In closing, I urge you to support the Community Connectors Grant in the strongest terms possible. It is life-changing for mentors, mentees, and their families. It is a true Ohio success story.

Sincerely,

Shannon Tuzzi, history/ELL teacher