

2006 Leading Light Award

Nominees for this award must have contributed to a program or project which has created an environment of positive change over a 3-5 year period in one or more of the following categories: Student Achievement, School-Community Connections, Education Advocacy and Career and Technical Education.

This year's winner has been influential in three of the four categories. They also satisfy the requirement of providing model programs that can be replicated statewide and they have successfully done so. This is the first time that a non-profit organization has been selected for this award, and I'm pleased to announce that the recipient of the 2006 Leading Light Award is Big Brothers Big Sisters Association of Florida.

This outstanding mentoring organization was incorporated in 1994, with a primary mission of creating educational partnerships that enhance the positive development of Florida's children. During the past 12 years they have served children in 428 cities located throughout 49 counties.

In 1999 the Association created a new program called Bigs in Schools and Sites, an academic-based mentoring initiative supported by the Florida Department of Education, The Florida Mentoring Partnership and the Volunteer Florida Foundation. The program works through this network of member agencies that directly address the academic challenges and developmental needs of children in our public school system. They do this by providing a professionally supported one-to-one mentoring program within C, D and F schools, with a focus on reading and other academic areas.

Their philosophy is to be a value-added academic partner to every child in need of assistance and to provide safe, trained and consistent mentors to work with students in an effort to advance their proficiency levels in reading, math and writing. The goal of Bigs in Schools and Sites is to help every student reach their highest level of achievement. Since its inception the program has grown from 1,000 students to more than 3,150 students this year.

The program's design is to work within each low performing school as a partner with the local district school superintendent and the administration of each local school. They also connect schools with community organizations and partners who bring volunteer mentors and resources to help build stronger community within the schools. Children who need academic assistance, as identified by either guidance or direct teacher referral, are matched with community volunteers who work on academics while building trust and relationships. The program provides an academic support and educational development system driven by each child's individual needs.

What is remarkable and innovative about the BBBS mentoring program is that it is not a "one-size-fits-all" program. Each child receives customized care and mentoring focused on the self-esteem needs of that one child, helping to secure the trust and openness necessary for learning. Over the past 6 years, Big Brothers Big Sisters has built on a

foundation of successfully achieving positive outcomes and demonstrated achievements, specifically in the areas of reading and math gain scores.

Year after year the program has met and exceeded its goals, dramatically enhancing student achievement as seen in the following statistics:

- 85% of mentored students improve or maintain academic performance.
- 85% of the mentored students improve or maintain school attendance.
- 80% of mentored students are promoted to the next grade level.
- 80% of mentored students show improvement on behavioral evaluations.

Dr. Phil Grise of Florida State University has independently studied this program over the past four years. His scientific findings included:

Dramatic changes in BBBS student behavior were detected. Suspensions and expulsions were down significantly.

Average attendance increased by 10% over the average student population.

BBBS mentored students had significantly fewer disciplinary reports filed than all students in school.

BBBS students were 1/3 less likely to receive any disciplinary action compared to the average student.

BBBS students showed greater gains from their previous year's FCAT in both Reading and Math than did the regular student population.

Over the past seven year this project has established strong collaborative partnerships with the corporate/business communities they serve. Brothers Big Sisters has defined the meaning and refined the value of one-to-one mentoring. They strive to enhance school resources through interactive partnerships as an advocate for education in the community.

Today there are over 200 corporate/community partnerships involved in this project, each with strong ties to their local community. The Bigs in Schools program is involved with more children and volunteers than any other organization. To date they have mentored 13,324 students statewide and have provided more than 1,201,872 hours of mentoring to Florida's children.

Big Brothers Big Sisters Bigs in Schools Program has a singular mission, to help the children of Florida reach their highest potential. We at SUNSPRA salute their efforts to enhance education by increasing student achievement, developing connections between school and community and by serving as an advocate for public education. It is now my pleasure to present the 2006 Leading Light Award to Stephen Kock, President of the Big Brothers, Big Sisters Association of Florida and Deb Thielen, State Chief Executive Officer.