



# School-to-School Mentorship: A Mini-Network With a Mentor School

Perspectives from the UCAN and  
RECN Programs

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This brief is based on interviews with and surveys of school administrators, teachers, and counselors from schools in the Urban College Acceleration Network ([UCAN](#)<sup>1</sup>) and in the Rural Early College Network ([RECN](#)<sup>2</sup>). RECN and UCAN are programs at the Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning ([CELL](#)<sup>3</sup>) at the University of Indianapolis. The networks, which operated from 2022 to 2024 (UCAN) and 2019 to 2025 (RECN), provided Indiana high schools with early-stage Early College programs with support from CELL and experienced mentor schools to achieve Early College endorsement. Staff from the [Early College Research Center](#),<sup>4</sup> part of [SERVE](#)<sup>5</sup> at UNC Greensboro, served as the external evaluators of the programs and conducted the interviews and administered the surveys.



Many educators are familiar with mentoring programs for novice teachers or new principals.<sup>10</sup> These workplace mentoring programs involve a relationship between a less experienced and a more experienced professional in which the purpose is the personal and professional growth of the mentee.<sup>11</sup> While mentorship relationships between individuals are well-studied, less is known about a mentorship model involving a mentor school matched with a few mentee schools in a “mini-network.”

This brief reports on an innovative model of school mentorship used to support the implementation of the Early College initiative in Indiana high schools. This arrangement connects three schools new to the Early College model with one experienced mentor school in a mini-network. In this brief, we describe the support structures and activities provided by mentor schools, the benefits of these activities for both mentee and mentor schools, and lessons learned from this unique mentorship model.

## EARLY COLLEGE GLOSSARY

**Early College High School**<sup>6</sup> – A high school or a program within a school that is designed to support students with barriers to higher education, allowing them to earn substantial college credit while in high school and inspiring them to pursue postsecondary opportunities.

**Core Principles**<sup>7</sup> – A framework with eight domains that guide Early College program implementation in Indiana.

**Endorsement**<sup>8</sup> – An endorsed Early College program has been evaluated by CELL and found to be executing the Core Principles at a high level.

**Dual Credit**<sup>9</sup> – Courses in which high school students can simultaneously earn both high school and college credit. These courses are taught by credentialed high school teachers or college faculty at high schools, online, or on college campuses.

**School Leadership Team (SLT)** – An organizing structure used to distribute leadership responsibilities for Early College among five to ten staff members. SLT members include administrators, counselors, dual credit teachers, higher education partner representatives, and district leadership.

## What Are Mentorship Mini-Networks?

Both the RECN and UCAN networks had the goal of increasing the number of endorsed Early College schools in Indiana. To support the schools in achieving endorsement, CELL created mini-networks to combine the benefits of mentorship and networks. School-to-school mentoring was conducted mainly through mini-network meetings with members of the schools' SLTs convened once a semester. Mentor schools offered one-on-one support to their mentees through phone or email communications between meetings.

The mini-network meetings were held at one of the member schools, with the mentor school hosting the first meeting followed by a rotation of the mentee schools. The meetings lasted four to five hours and typically included a tour of the host school building and a discussion of topics related to developing an Early College program. Some meetings also included classroom observations and conversations with Early College students at the host school. This structure

allowed SLT members of schools in the mini-networks to develop closer relationships with their counterparts at other schools.

During the mini-network meetings, schools discussed current issues, called problems of practice, that the partner schools were facing and for which they wanted to get practical advice from other partner schools and their mentor. Schools submitted these topics to their mentor school in advance, and during the meeting at least one problem from each partner school was discussed. Often, problems were related to implementing one of the Early College Core Principles; other times, schools wanted to discuss other issues, such as dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions or communication with parents and their community.

In both programs, mini-networks were nested within larger program-wide networks, which included 20 rural schools (five mentor and 15 partner schools) in RECN and 16 urban schools (four mentor and 12 partner schools) in UCAN. Program-wide networks met once a semester and also for a one-day summer retreat each year. These meetings provided additional opportunities for schools to meet in mini-network groups to discuss practical issues and build relationships.

### EXAMPLE PROBLEMS OF PRACTICE

- Developing teacher and staff buy-in to Early College
- Dual credit teacher recruitment, credentialing, and retention
- Integrating or aligning AP and dual credit courses
- Maintaining the rigor of dual credit courses and preparing students for this rigor
- Communicating with parents and communities about Early College
- Preparing for the endorsement review process
- Recruiting, selecting, and supporting Early College student cohorts

### KEY INSIGHTS ABOUT MENTORSHIP MINI-NETWORK IMPLEMENTATION

- *External support is important at the beginning, but mentors can take on increasing responsibility for planning over time.* When the mini-networks were first established, CELL took the lead in organizing and scheduling mentorship activities. CELL also set up the agendas for mini-network meetings with mentor and mentee principals contributing ideas about the content of the meetings, especially the problems of practice. After some experience in their new role, mentors

could take on increasing responsibility for planning and leading meetings and providing support for their partner schools.

- *Mini-networks benefit from informal interactions between formal meetings.* It is important for mentors to meet virtually or in person with their partner schools in between full network and mini-network meetings to maintain ongoing communication and support, which in turn keeps them up-to-date on their partner schools' progress and enables them to be responsive to their unique needs. One mentor principal suggested regular check-ins between the in-person meetings, explaining,

The [mini-network] meetings definitely are pretty spaced out. Then you come back and it's almost like you forget about all of that that happened. I'm envisioning this, a 20- or 30-minute touch point more frequently with the other [mini-network] principals: 'How'd this week go? What things do you run into? Anything I can help with?' Just more brief, frequent touch points.

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## What Are the Benefits of Mentorship Mini-Networks?

Mini-network meetings, originally designed in response to COVID-19 restrictions, proved to be so valuable to the school teams that they became an integral part of the support provided for Early College implementation. RECN and UCAN participants identified benefits to the mini-networks for both the partner and the mentor schools.

## BENEFITS FOR MENTEES

While the full network meetings provided a “big picture” perspective and helped members develop a vision for their Early College initiative, mini-network meetings were focused on specific details of implementation. These meetings allowed members to exchange ideas and share specific practices. Participants identified the following benefits for mentees:

- The small group structure facilitated in-depth discussion and collaborative problem-solving of problems of practice because members were able to form close relationships quickly and thus feel comfortable within the group.
- Rotating the mini-networking meeting location meant members had the opportunity to visit three other schools. The time spent touring the school, observing classes, and speaking with students was one of the most valued parts of the meetings. A principal said that “As far as professional learning goes, getting into other people's schools is personally one of the most valuable experiences over the time of my career.” A counselor noted that they particularly valued seeing their mentor school because “you could see the years of progress.”
- During mini-networking meetings, participants had the opportunity to communicate with staff in similar positions in other schools, which was also considered one of the most valuable supports received through the program. School staff valued getting ideas and perspectives on how to solve problems or structure various components of Early College from others with the same role in their own schools. One participant said, “The role-specific time is helpful because it's just good to know that other administrators are having the same questions and facing the same things. You get isolated in your own little school.”

## BENEFITS FOR MENTORS

Mentor schools were selected from experienced and endorsed Early Colleges willing to share their knowledge and experience with others. While participants from all mentor schools agreed that mentorship requires extra time and effort, they also appreciated the opportunity to serve as a mentor and the benefits that came with it. Benefits included the following:

- Mentors learned from their partner schools and from the entire process of being a mentor. As one mentor principal shared, “We probably learn just as much from our partner schools as they have from us as a mentor, but then being able to put those things into practice and see how that's impacting our students and their experience has been great.”
- Being a mentor pushed them to keep improving their Early College programs. Once schools had been endorsed, they often did not have any external incentives to keep developing their programs. Being a mentor gave them that incentive. As one mentor principal said, “We were complacent. We got a flow, we've got our students. But when we thought about them, [the mini-network] really helped us think about, ‘What is college-going culture?’”
- While being selected as a mentor was recognition that they were a model school, many participants found that actually working with new programs prompted them to reflect on and appreciate the progress they had made over time in their own

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programs. A mentor principal shared, “It's been very validating to take a step back and realize the journey that we've traveled over the last eight to 10 years in our Early College experience.”

Mentors were willing to spend extra time to help other schools due to their recognition of the benefits of mentorship for both their own schools and their mentees. As one mentor principal said, “I know on our end as mentors, to sustain that moving forward, we would not need that financial component to still try to be a good mentor and a good resource to other Early College schools. It's been a very positive experience for us. We'd love to continue to do it in any capacity.”

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“Being a mentor school has been a very positive experience for us. We'd love to continue to do it in any capacity.”

## What Issues Need to be Considered When Replicating Mentorship Mini-Networks?

The RECN and UCAN evaluations provide insight into two factors associated with the effective replication of mini-networks in other settings: membership in the network and identifying, recruiting, and supporting mentor schools.

### MINI-NETWORKS' MEMBERSHIP

An important consideration for establishing mentorship mini-networks is who should be included in the group. Network facilitators must consider group size, school characteristics, physical distance between schools, and schools' level of experience with a new initiative when matching mentor and mentee schools. Below are some of the lessons we learned about mini-network composition.

- *One mentor with three partners is a good size for the mini-network.* This size was small enough to allow for relationship building but large enough to allow for robust discussion and feedback during mini-network meetings.
- *Schools need to remain in the same mini-network for at least two years in order to build the relationships that facilitate productive collaboration and learning.* A mentor principal explained how the group dynamics evolved over time, saying, “It seems like that first year was definitely getting to know [each other] and building the relationships of who’s where and what are they doing and how are they helping. And the second year was definitely more action-packed in terms of making progress towards ultimately the goals that each school had.”
- *Collaboration and learning are more effective when the schools in a mini-network have similar issues, are at the same stage of Early College development, and are of the same size.* In RECN, schools were initially grouped in mini-networks by geographic proximity; after three years, they were regrouped based on school size in response to feedback from participating schools that grouping by size would allow schools with similar concerns to work together. As one principal shared, “The new [mini-network] structure was – we were all size-wise, similar. Which I think is helpful because the way a small school does things is very different from the way a large school does things.” In UCAN, participants observed that networks with partner schools at very different stages of Early College program development were more difficult for mentor schools to lead. Partner schools tended to have very different questions and problems, as well varying levels of experience to draw from, making collaborative problem-solving discussions slower or less fruitful.

## RECRUITMENT, TRAINING, AND SUPPORTS FOR MENTOR SCHOOLS

The mentor school plays a critical role in the success of the mentorship mini-network. Below are recommendations about selecting mentor schools and supporting them through the process.

- *There should be criteria and a process for selecting mentor schools.* Mentor school principals and CELL staff reflected on qualities that a good mentor principal should demonstrate, which included: (1) being a conscientious, responsive, and proactive leader with good communication and listening skills; (2) taking their role seriously; and (3) maintaining a culture of equality with mentee schools and being collaborative and willing to share knowledge and resources.
- *Mentor school teams need initial training and resources in the form of a written manual and in-person sessions with experienced mentors and the intermediary organization (such as CELL) and need to be provided information on the schools they work with.* CELL staff brought mentor school principals on board by explaining their role at the beginning of the program. Through their experience in their networks, the mentor school teams gained a better understanding of what the role entailed, including expectations for time and work and the responsibilities of mentor schools. These should be articulated in a written manual and shared with new mentors. New mentor school teams should also receive initial training on the different models for Early College; while they are experts on their own model, information about others would help them support a wider range of implementation choices by their partner schools. Receiving information about their partner schools would help them differentiate their support for each school. As one mentor noted, “To me, that was one of the biggest problems that my group

had, is we did not have a needs assessment or [the partner schools'] application to even know where they were [in the Early College implementation process]." Finally, the training should include information about the best strategies for mentoring, perhaps through a panel session with current mentors.

- *Mentors need an ongoing Professional Learning Community (PLC) in order to collaborate on the mentorship issues they encounter in their work. Mentors could support and learn from each other's experience and reflect on the process and outcomes of their mentorship activities by meeting as a PLC group.*

## Conclusion

Mentoring school teams by a more experienced school within a mini-network is a novel form of professional learning that our evaluation has shown to be beneficial and effective for facilitating educational change. When professional development providers or district leaders implement this arrangement, they should consider the insights shared in this brief related to mini-network organization and membership, the specific benefits that this structure provides, the role of mentors, and recruitment, training, and supports for mentor schools.



**For more information about the UCAN and RECN evaluations, please contact Eric Grebing at [egrebing@serve.org](mailto:egrebing@serve.org). To learn more about the Early College Research Center and for more resources about Early College, see [EarlyCollegeResearch.uncg.edu](http://EarlyCollegeResearch.uncg.edu).**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <https://cell.uindy.edu/our-work/early-college-high-school/ucan-project>

<sup>2</sup> <https://cell.uindy.edu/our-work/early-college-high-school/recn-project>

<sup>3</sup> <https://cell.uindy.edu>

<sup>4</sup> <https://earlycollegeresearch.uncg.edu>

<sup>5</sup> <https://serve.uncg.edu>

<sup>6</sup> <https://cell.uindy.edu/our-work/early-college-high-school>

<sup>7</sup> <https://cell.uindy.edu/our-work/early-college-high-school/#core-principles>

<sup>8</sup> <https://cell.uindy.edu/our-work/early-college-high-school/cell-early-college-endorsement>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.in.gov/doi/students/dual-credit>

<sup>10</sup> Good Principals Aren't Born – They're Mentored: Are We Investing Enough to Get the School Leaders We Need? (2007). <https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/Good-Principals-Arent-Born-Theyre-Mentored.pdf>;

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<sup>11</sup> Eby, L. T., Rhodes, J. E., and Allen, T. D. (2007). Definition and Evolution of Mentoring. In T. D. Allen & L. T. Eby (Eds.) *The Blackwell Handbook of Mentoring: A Multiple Perspectives Approach* (pp.7-20). Blackwell Publishing Ltd.;

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