

OC LEADER BOARD

Opinion, Analysis, Insight

OC CEOs Can Equip Tomorrow's Workforce Through Mentorship

One year has undone an entire decade's worth of progress for opportunity youth.

Over the past 10 years, the rate of 16 to 24-year-olds who are not in school nor working, referred to as "opportunity youth," fell steadily from a high of 14.7% to 11.2%, affecting 4.3 million youngsters, or 1 in every 9, according to a study by the **Social Science Research Council**.

Since the onset of the pandemic, that same rate may double to nearly 9 million youngsters.

These totals are the highest since the aftermath of the Great Recession and represent one-quarter of our nation's young people facing long-term effects on earnings, employment, homeownership and health.

This devastating news is more than just a concern for children, parents and youth-serving organizations. This talent crisis impacts businesses and economies across Orange County and beyond.

When opportunity youth are cut from institutions and experiences that adequately prepare them for a self-sufficient adulthood, it weakens our talent pipeline. And with the second largest workforce in California, OC has much to lose.

One of the most tangible ways to reverse the residual damage COVID-19 wrought on our next generation of talent is through mentorship and exposing youth to strong local leaders.

Now is the time to set the vision for how we can help youth emerge stronger from this crisis—and CEOs can play a major role in building the vibrant, diverse workforce of OC's future.

The Orange County and Inland Chapter of Big Brothers Big Sisters, which dates its local operations to 1958, has 71 paid staff and 3,159 volunteers who helped mentor 4,405 youngsters in the year ended June 30.

After the coronavirus struck, we immediately pivoted to a virtual model of mentoring. We trained volunteers to connect with mentees via video chat platforms like Zoom. We also launched our first e-mentoring program model that will remain virtual indefinitely. Called College Bigs, it helps high school students learn how to become the first generation in their families to attend college.

We were able to retain most of our volunteers and continue making new matches in our traditional program, but our site-based program did see about a 15% decline in youth due to school closures and challenges in reaching some of our younger mentees.

A Path Forward

The threat of disconnection casts the largest shadow over low-income youth, leaving them even further behind their peers. Due to COVID-19, children from low-income households are expected to lose 12.4 months of learning, double the loss experienced by students overall.

In OC, almost half of K-12 public school students are Hispanic. Nearly the same number are eligible for free or reduced school lunch. These individuals are poised to become our future professionals, yet they must first overcome pre-existing educational disparities exacerbated by the pandemic.

Mentoring is a proven solution that supports educational re-engagement for these vulnerable youth, clearing a pathway to high school persistence and postsecondary plans. The World Bank recognizes the one-to-one mentoring work of Big Brothers Big Sisters and socioemotional learning as the two most impactful interventions for keeping students in school. The Boston Consulting Group in 2015 estimated that for every dollar invested in mentoring by Big Brothers/Big Sisters, \$18 is returned to society.

While education creates a foundation, strategies must be layered to further reduce disconnection rates; it's not a one size fits all approach.

In OC, work-based learning and experiences can not only advance equity, but they can also strengthen a business climate

already primed for entrepreneurial growth and innovation. Early exposure to career options prepares opportunity youth to enter the workforce and make marked contributions as our economy continues to recover.

Mentoring continues to fill the work-based learning gap at a time when, according to Glassdoor, at least half of all internships have disappeared. Big Brothers Big Sisters oversees a nationwide workplace mentoring program for high school students, matching them one-to-

one with corporate volunteers. This volunteerism helps close the skills gap, builds social capital and positions youth to explore industries that

are vital to the communities in which they live.

Our work in OC, for example, has focused on mentoring in thriving regional sectors such as financial services with **Pimco**, STEM fields with **Edwards Lifesciences** and hospitality with **Disneyland Resort**.

We must continue creating these mentoring matches because it's a model that works well. A social ROI study showed that 47% of youth who had a mentor reported holding senior leadership positions in their working environments, compared to 32% in a control group.

Workplace Mentoring is Good for Business

As OC strives to build a competitive innovation ecosystem, it's necessary for CEOs to invest in solutions like mentoring that can curb the long-term business impacts of youth disconnection.

We are fortunate to have executives advocating for a more equitable workforce in OC that represents different perspectives, skill sets and lived experiences. Groups like the **CEO Leadership Alliance (CLA-OC)** have actively stepped up to expand our region's future talent pool by empowering first-generation students from underserved areas.

Last November, through partnership with the CLA-OC, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County and the Inland Empire launched a new workplace mentoring site at **Children's Hospital of OC (CHOC)**. Students from Anaheim, a city disproportionately impacted by the health and financial implications of the pandemic, were connected one-to-one with mentors from all professional fields at CHOC. Providing exposure to careers spanning from IT to HR to social work opens new doors of possibility in the face of disconnection.

As CEO of our local Big Brothers Big Sisters, I'm encouraged to have executives like those in the CLA-OC rise to the challenge and embrace mentorship as a solution for creating and sustaining jobs.

What if more local leaders put words into action? We'd like to invite Orange County's CEOs and their employees to become more involved with Big Brothers Big Sisters.

We receive anywhere from 500 to 600 inquiries from families during a typical year. Last year, we saw an increase in demand of around 30%.

We could expand mentoring opportunities in OC to more companies and industries in need of skilled professionals. We could not only begin to recoup the decade of losses experienced in 2020, but also chart a new course for the decade ahead that addresses this crisis of talent and disconnection head-on.

CEOs are connectors, with the power to bring together the right people, business practices and resources. CEOs are also visionaries, seeing the future of what could be and how to make the world better. If we all invest today in mentorship, we can shape tomorrow's leaders—and in 10 years, see a more diverse, equitable workforce leading our region forward.

Editor's Note: Sloane Keane is CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County and the Inland Empire, which is the second-largest among 250 agencies nationwide. For more information: ocbigs.org



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ORANGE COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL

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