

IGNITE

Senior-Freshman Mentoring Program

Informational Book

by Andrew Hanna, Founder of IGNITE

What **IS**

IGNITE ?

IGNITE is a mentoring program that pairs incoming ninth-grade students with experienced and willing twelfth-grade advisors. The seniors act in “Big Brother/ Big Sister” roles and keep in contact with their freshmen partners throughout the year, both formally through IGNITE meetings and events and informally via phone, internet, etc.



IGNITE was first developed and initiated at Stanton College Preparatory School in Jacksonville, Florida prior to the 2009-2010 School year. From 2000 to 2003, Stanton College Prep was ranked first in *Newsweek* magazine's list of the top 1,000 public schools in the United States, and is the only school in the nation to have been in the top 5 every year from 2000-2009.

Why was IGNITE

Founded ?

IGNITE was created partially in response to the Opportunity Scholars Program introduced to Stanton just before the 2008-2009 school year. This initiative brought students, mostly ninth-grade, from underprivileged areas of town- where the local school was considered “failing-”to Stanton. These newcomers understandably had difficulties adjusting to the rigors of Stanton’s academics, and some also had trouble immersing themselves socially. The result was a large number of students (dropping out and either going to their home schools, opting to be home-schooled, or dropping out of the school system entirely. The presence of a mentor and friend from the senior class could potentially solve both the academic and social problems.

The problems that come with transitioning to high school face all students, and even those who have been doing fine academically can be fazed by these changes. It does not help that the culture of most high schools encourages seniors to ignore, or even ridicule, freshman students. Freshman year is a chaotic time, and the attitudes developed during this time are the foundation for the rest of high school, and even the rest of life. While there are many who simply struggle hopelessly through high school as a result of a negative freshmen experience, often these experiences are the cause of drop-outs. Studies have shown that in order to prevent drop-outs, early intervention is key.

Ninth-grade is a pivotal year, as shown by the fact that it has consistently shown the greatest incidence of drop-outs. Statistics show that every 29 seconds another student gives up on school, resulting in about 1.2 million American high school students who drop out every year. Dropping out of high school has huge implications, as students who do so are twice as likely to slip into poverty in only one year, more than eight times as likely to end up in jail or prison, and twice less likely to vote or participate in community projects. Finally, the drop-out problem is predicted to continue to increase in the foreseeable future unless some change is made. IGNITE is meant to be that change.

What are the
Goals of *IGNITE* ?

The IGNITE program has several goals that include both tangible and intangible positive effects on the students at the school in which it is implemented. This is what IGNITE is meant to accomplish:

- IGNITE makes the transition to high school more smooth and comfortable, as freshmen have an advisor to help them with anything related to high school life, and a friend to encourage and support them.
- IGNITE ensures that no single student falls through the cracks; every ninth-grade student who is willing to be helped will be helped.
- IGNITE creates an overall school environment of helpfulness and unity, as the senior class is actively involved in helping those younger than them.
- IGNITE provides a way for seniors to stay involved and enthusiastic regarding school activities, allowing them to truly leave a legacy on their school.
- IGNITE gives freshmen hope and the knowledge that there is someone there to help them do whatever it takes to succeed, ultimately providing a safety net that will prevent drop-outs.

Many students, sadly, do not have anyone in their lives to lead them in the right direction, and their IGNITE partner fills that role. IGNITE's mission is to create a unity within the school that keeps freshmen excited. IGNITE makes it so that if a freshman needs

help with his/her studies, he/she does not give up but instead knows there is someone there to help.

Whereas at many schools the norm is for seniors to pay freshmen no attention, this barrier is shattered by IGNITE. Consequently, students are less stressed about the high school experience, more successful and happy during high school, more likely to seek out help, and less likely to give up hope.

How was *IGNITE*

Implemented ?

From orientation and the very first day of school, the incoming ninth-grade students are shown that they are appreciated and welcome. To begin the implementation process, word of IGNITE must be spread before school starts and a sense of energy must surround the program. I, the founder and president of IGNITE, spoke in front of parents and students at all Freshman Orientations (which occurred a week or so before school). Fliers were passed out and presentations were made so as to introduce the program to the parents and students and to allow a line of communication in case any questions existed. Advertisements were placed in all school publications and newsletters. I also created a Facebook group in order to recruit my senior peers.

At the Freshman Assembly, which was on the first day of school, a few seniors and I spoke in front of the new freshman class and related to them the idea that the senior class is there to help them out, and that IGNITE is an exciting initiative. Here, the freshmen were invited to sign up. At the sign-up tables, freshmen were instructed to sign-up on the master sheet, to fill out a quick multiple-choice personality profile survey, and to write their contact information, interests, lunch schedule, gender, and any special needs/requests on an index card. I also obtained a list of those students who struggled both academically and disciplinarily in middle school from the guidance department, and I sent letters of invitation to these students (who had not already signed up). Special attention was given to these students, and they were paired with some of the most dedicated and inspired seniors.

I also spoke at the Senior Assembly and conducted sign-ups in the same fashion. Pairings were made based on gender, class schedule, the survey, and other special

requests. Then, the senior and freshmen index cards were stapled together and sent to the corresponding senior through the Student Activities Office. A meeting- this time of only the Senior IGNITE Mentors- took place, where the mentors were given key information about the opportunities available to freshmen, so that they can guide them in the right direction. They were also lectured on being a responsible mentor, and reminded of the seriousness of the program. Communication with the senior class is relatively easy because most twelfth-grade students are regular Facebook users. An IGNITE group was created, and messages are sent to coordinate upcoming events and to relay critical information.

The Inaugural Luncheon took place in Stanton's auditorium during lunch. Seniors were permitted to leave class a minute or so early in order to be waiting to greet their buddies warmly. The auditorium was divided by the last names of the freshmen, and seniors were instructed to wait at the area corresponding to their freshman's name. The pairs met up for the first time, exchanged contact information (using the index cards which were sent to the seniors), enjoyed lunch together, and began their long-term relationships.

How is *IGNITE*'s energy
Sustained ?

Throughout the course of the year, there have been several organized IGNITE events, including Quarterly Evaluation Meetings, a Gift Day, the upcoming Closing Celebration, and others. Scheduling activities is not a difficult task because of the fact that the students were paired with the intent of ensuring that they have the same lunch period. So, most activities can be easily scheduled during lunch. The second meeting we had, aside from the Inaugural Luncheon, was an IGNITE Tour of the School, which was a lunch period when the freshmen met the seniors in the senior courtyard and then followed them on a tour of the key places to know at Stanton. The following event was a gift day, when seniors presented their freshmen with a gift of \$5 - \$10. Seniors were encouraged to bring a helpful gift, and a goofy gift in addition if they so desired. Also, we have had Quarterly Evaluation Lunches, where seniors and freshmen meet to discuss academic, social, and disciplinary successes/ shortcomings and discuss how to improve them. Seniors are encouraged to hit on specific points at each meeting, such as organizational skills, studying habits, and time management. But ultimately, the seniors use what they have were taught at the first meeting and their own personal experiences to tailor their discussions to the problems and needs of their particular freshmen.

On top of these structured meetings, IGNITE partners meet up and keep in contact regularly. Seniors often meet with their buddies to tutor, help make scheduling decisions, give advice, or just hang

out. Freshmen have their seniors contact information on hand, and can set up meetings through the Student Activities Office. An IGNITE Leadership Council of 7 seniors as well as the Student Activities Director and Senior Class Sponsors meets bi-monthly in order to check on the progress of the program and to brainstorm new event ideas.

What makes *IGNITE* **Different ?**

The above descriptions of the IGNITE program helps to show how it is fundamentally different from

other similar programs. Firstly, many mentoring programs are merely offered to students, without creating the distinct atmosphere of supportiveness in the school that IGNITE does through active involvement of seniors. Also, IGNITE pairs seniors with freshmen based on a great number of factors, and takes special care to draw students with a history of problems into the program (and to pair these students with the most dedicated seniors). This program does not, like many other mentoring programs, introduce the partners and then leave them alone. While it certainly depends on willing volunteers who care about the lives of the freshmen, IGNITE keeps the energy going throughout the entire year by conducting new events, providing specific ways to meet with IGNITE buddies, sending encouraging reminders of the availability of their seniors, and creating friendships that are daily reminders that these freshmen truly have a support system at their fingertips.

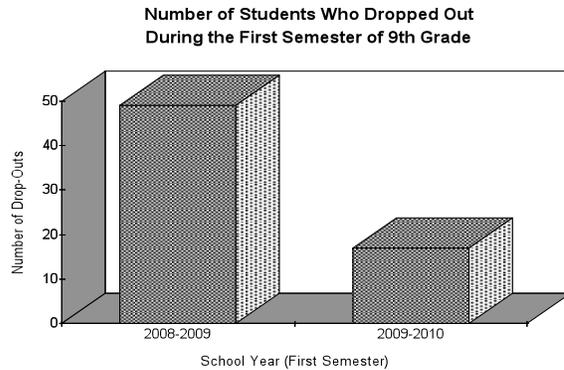
What **Progress** has *IGNITE* made?

To begin with, 220 of the 311 seniors in Stanton's Class of 2010 voluntarily offered their time and effort to the IGNITE program. 206 freshmen decided they would like a mentor, and joined the program. This left

IGNITE with 436 members, making it by far the largest club in Stanton's history.

The supportiveness of IGNITE and the positive impact it has had on the attitudes of freshmen is hard to quantify. However, according to a survey conducted as recently as this week, 77.94% of freshmen involved said that the IGNITE program has made the overall environment of Stanton more supportive. Meanwhile 69.12 % of the IGNITE freshmen said that the IGNITE program has been helpful in their transition to high school, and 76.47% said that IGNITE has made them feel more comfortable and welcome than they would have if the program did not exist.

The most common time for a student to drop out, particularly at Stanton, is during the first semester of freshman year. When looking at drop-outs, statistics overwhelmingly support IGNITE's positive influence as well. Last school year, 49 students dropped out of Stanton by the end of February (first semester). This year, the first of many for IGNITE, the number has dropped to 17. This means 65.31% less students withdrew from Stanton during the first semester of the IGNITE program when compared to the year before it was initiated. Of the 17 students, only 8 were participants in IGNITE, meaning that 52.94% of those who did drop out did not accept the invitation to be assigned a mentor. This also means that just 3.90% of freshmen in IGNITE have dropped out.



I have been told many encouraging stories of how IGNITE has benefited freshmen this year. My fellow senior Taylor told me of her IGNITE buddy, Megan. Megan was, as many freshmen are, very self-conscious and insecure in coming to high school. She wanted to run for freshman class president, however due to these feelings she was not going to do it. Because of Taylor's encouragement and advice, Megan pursued her goal and ran for freshman class president, ultimately winning the office and triumphing over her doubts. My friend Kevin's IGNITE buddy Deshawn recently opened up to him about his past drug problems. Deshawn has a broken family, and having Kevin there to talk with him and encourage him to continue on his newfound path of making right choices means the world to him.

These results have been reached because of the willingness and passion of the seniors I recruited to join IGNITE. The majority of the senior class volunteered to help out after I spoke to them about the initiative and its importance, further showing that the youth of today are willing to help one another if an organization is in place. The Leadership Council has been key in organizing IGNITE events. The administration at Stanton and some local organizations have been extremely helpful in spreading word about the program to other schools. Through my connections with some leaders of the community in the non-profit and media areas, I have also been able to raise awareness of the program and the problems facing students due to a lack of support for the education system.

Appendix:

IGNITE Forms and Press Clippings

- IGNITE flier
- IGNITE 3rd Quarter Letter to Freshmen (is an

- example of letters that are sent regularly)
- Article in *Florida Times-Union* about IGNITE
 - Excerpt from article in *Florida Times-Union* about the Drop-Out Problem
 - Article from Stanton's *Devil's Advocate* about IGNITE

IGNITE

Senior-Freshman Mentoring Program

A new organization is starting at Stanton College Prep this year. It pairs a member of the Senior Class of 2010 with a freshman in a mentoring, or "Big Brother/ Big Sister," role. The goals and benefits of the program are major and far-reaching:

- **IGNITE** will match an experienced Stanton senior with a freshman for academic guidance and advice,

- **IGNITE** will give each freshman an older friend to go to with any problems, or simply to hang out.
- **IGNITE** offers seniors the opportunity to stay involved, and leave a mark on Stanton that will remain long past graduation.
- **IGNITE** will further unite Stanton College Prep's students, creating a strong bond between its oldest and youngest students.
- **IGNITE** will help to prevent freshmen from making mistakes that could substantially affect their futures (integrity violations, disciplinary violations, etc.)

To join this exciting program, send an e-mail to andrewhanna2010@gmail.com or occonnorm2@duvalschools.org, or sign up at your class assembly.

IGNITE: Senior-Freshman Mentoring Program

Dear *IGNITE* Freshman,

Your ninth-grade year is almost three-quarters of the way complete, and we, as the Senior Class of 2010, would just like to let you know how proud we are of what you have accomplished and what we are sure you will go on to achieve. This has been an awesome year at Stanton, and we sincerely hope that the senior class, in particular the *IGNITE* program, has helped make your freshman experience an amazing one.

Still, there is a lot of time left before the school year is over! We want to make absolutely certain that you have a person to go to with any questions or concerns you may have. If you are in need of any help or advice, feel free to contact your *IGNITE* senior at any time. Though we won't always be on campus, particularly in early May because of AP and IB exams, that does not mean we aren't here to help you achieve a strong finish to the year.

If you no longer have your *IGNITE* mentor's contact information or are

uncertain, simply stop by Room 702 and ask Mrs. O'Connor, whose office is in the back of the room. We hope that the relationship formed this year will continue to be an asset in your future years of high school, so we encourage you to create a Facebook account in order to stay connected with your senior (the majority of the senior class is on Facebook). This way, you will have an experienced mentor who can help you as you face other decisions and obstacles later in your high school career, such as applying to college.

Finally, our last *IGNITE* celebration is scheduled for June 3, 2010. We will have this pizza lunch in the auditorium. We hope to see you there so we can congratulate you on a great year!

Sincerely,
Stanton Senior Class of 2010