

From Vision to Practice: Aligning Student Leadership With Portrait of a Graduate Goals

A Case Study at Newburyport High School

Overview

Newburyport High School (MA) began its mentoring journey with a clear goal: to strengthen student belonging and ensure that every student felt connected within the school community. As the school emerged from the pandemic, educators recognized a deeper need. Many students were returning to school more isolated, less connected, and unsure of their place within the broader community.

While Newburyport had a highly involved student population, connection was not consistent for all students. Some remained on the margins—less engaged, less connected, and without a clear sense of belonging.

At the same time, the school was working to move forward with priorities aligned to its **Portrait of a Graduate**, emphasizing skills such as communication, collaboration, leadership, and self-awareness. The challenge became clear: how to build these essential life and leadership skills in a way that was both meaningful and sustainable, while also strengthening relationships across the school.

Like many schools, Newburyport explored ways to address this need through advisory and specialized enrichment blocks. Educators designed lessons focused on life skills, leadership, and relationship-building, while also attempting to create peer-to-peer mentoring structures. These efforts reflected a deep commitment to students, but over time revealed a common challenge: without a clear system, mentoring was difficult to sustain, varied across classrooms, and often lacked consistent student ownership.

In seeking a more intentional and sustainable approach, a team of educators—including the school librarian—began researching best practices in mentoring and youth development. Their work highlighted a key insight: meaningful mentoring is not built through one-time lessons or informal interactions alone, but through structured systems that develop both relationships and student leadership.

This search ultimately led them to Ignite.

Ignite provided a model that aligned directly with the school's priorities—developing leadership capacity in mentors while strengthening connection and belonging for mentees. By intentionally building both sides of the relationship, the model offered a scalable way to support student growth while strengthening school culture.



In partnership with Ignite, Newburyport High School launched a structured, near-peer mentoring model designed to embed mentoring within the school day while building student leadership capacity. The program began with a **week of summer training**, preparing mentors and executive mentors to lead with intention, facilitate lessons, and support younger peers.

Now in its third year of implementation, the program engages upperclassmen as trained mentors and executive mentors who facilitate structured advisory lessons while providing ongoing informal support throughout the school year.

During the 2025–26 school year, **179 freshmen** were paired with trained mentors. Students participated in **monthly formal mentoring sessions**, supplemented by regular check-ins, events, and informal relationship-building opportunities.

Rather than positioning students as passive recipients of support, the model intentionally develops youth as **leaders, facilitators, and culture-builders within their school community**.

The Role of Belonging in Student Success

Research consistently shows that ninth grade is a critical transition year linked to attendance, belonging, and long-term graduation outcomes. Students who feel connected to peers and adults are significantly more likely to persist academically and socially (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; CDC, 2021).

Near-peer mentoring leverages this insight: students often listen most closely to other students.

System Design

Ignite's mentoring structure includes:

- Leadership training beginning in summer (July)
- Explicitly defined roles including Mentor, Executive Mentor, and Lead Executive Mentor
- Monthly structured mentoring lessons
- Small-group facilitation led by student mentors
- Ignite Leadership Curriculum
- Informal connection opportunities between sessions

Mentors are responsible not only for relationship-building but also for **planning, presenting, and facilitating learning experiences** for younger peers.

This design simultaneously supports:

1. Freshman belonging and transition
2. Leadership development for upperclassmen



Program Evolution and System Alignment

As implementation progressed, Newburyport High School sought to deepen the impact of mentoring by more intentionally aligning the work to its Portrait of a Graduate competencies, including communication, collaboration, leadership, and self-awareness. While the initial model strengthened relationships and student connection, school leaders recognized a growing need for greater consistency, deeper leadership development, and a more systematic approach that could be sustained across classrooms.

In partnership with Ignite, this next phase of implementation focused on moving from a program to a fully embedded leadership system.

Leveraging an existing enrichment block within the school schedule, Ignite supported the development of a dedicated leadership course for executive mentors. All executive mentors now enroll in Ignite as a class, where they engage directly with the Ignite Leadership Curriculum while developing the skills necessary to lead, facilitate, and mentor their peers.

This shift represents a critical component of Ignite's full implementation model: providing protected time within the school day for leadership development, ensuring that mentors are not only participating, but being intentionally prepared to lead.

At the core of this approach is Ignite's train-the-trainer model, which creates a structured leadership pipeline within the school:

- The advisor, Lynne, facilitates and models the lesson content
- Executive mentors engage with the material, unpack key concepts, and prepare for delivery
- Executive mentors then train mentors, adapting lessons and building facilitation capacity
- Mentors lead structured sessions with freshmen, applying both content and leadership skills

This layered model ensures that leadership is not only taught, but practiced, reinforced, and transferred across student groups, creating both consistency and student ownership.

Between formal sessions, students extend learning through additional projects, initiatives, and informal mentoring moments that support personal development and key school transitions. These experiences reinforce that leadership is not confined to a lesson, but is lived out across the school day.

By embedding mentoring within the academic schedule and aligning it with broader graduate outcomes, Newburyport—supported by Ignite—established a more sustainable, scalable system, strengthening both implementation fidelity and student leadership capacity.

The impact of this system-level approach was recognized at the district level. The school board highlighted the program's success in advancing both student leadership and Portrait of a Graduate competencies. As a result, a neighboring school, Andover High School, adopted the Ignite mentoring model the following year, demonstrating the potential for replication across contexts.



Findings

1. Leadership Identity Development

Mentors consistently reported shifts in how they see themselves.

- **63%** explicitly described seeing themselves “as a leader”
- **85%** reported increased confidence

“I’ve never thought of myself as a leader before, but now I see that leadership can look many different ways.”

2. Communication & Public Speaking Growth

Communication emerged as the most frequently cited skill gain.

- **81%** reported growth in public speaking or facilitation
- **52%** described improved group leadership

Students noted improvements in:

- Projecting voice
- Leading discussions
- Adapting explanations
- Facilitating participation

“I can command a room now instead of standing in the background.”

While growth in public speaking was widely reported, over half of mentors also identified development in **group facilitation**—a more complex and demanding leadership competency. Unlike public speaking, facilitation requires real-time decision-making, responsiveness to group dynamics, and the ability to guide discussion while maintaining student engagement. These skills are not easily scripted or rehearsed; rather, they develop through practice in authentic leadership contexts.

The emergence of facilitation as a reported area of growth suggests that mentors were not only gaining confidence, but actively engaging in **applied leadership**, taking responsibility for guiding peer learning experiences. Research indicates that leadership development is most effective when individuals are provided with opportunities to practice leadership in real-world settings, rather than through observation alone (Rhodes, 2020).

These findings indicate that mentors were not simply participating in a program, but were developing the capacity to lead—demonstrating both interpersonal communication skills and the ability to manage group processes. In this way, communication growth extended beyond individual confidence to include the development of skills essential for leadership, collaboration, and future academic and professional success.



3. Freshman Belonging & Connection

Mentors observed strong relational outcomes for freshmen:

- **78%** reported freshmen becoming more comfortable and open
- **67%** saw stronger cross-grade connections
- **44%** described freshmen seeking help outside mentoring time

“They now have someone to go to with questions.”

“Freshman and upperclassmen have started to mix.”

These patterns align with belonging research linking peer relationships to academic engagement and persistence (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

4. School Climate & Community

Students described the mentoring program as strengthening overall school culture:

- Increased cross-grade interaction
- More inclusive spaces
- Greater school spirit
- A “closer knit” environment
- “It helps many people find a place in the school.”

Triangulated Evidence: Teacher and Freshman Feedback (2023–24)

To complement mentor reflections, Newburyport High School also collected perception data from both freshman teachers (who hosted mentors during advisory) and freshmen participating in the mentoring experience. This additional feedback provides an external lens on implementation quality and student experience.

Teacher-rated effectiveness: Teachers rated the program’s overall effectiveness at 9.1/10, noting visible growth in mentor leadership over the course of the year.

Teacher-observed mentor growth: Teachers consistently described mentors becoming more capable of leading in real time—shifting from delivering scripted activities to facilitating dynamic, responsive sessions. Commonly observed areas of growth included:

- stronger confidence and presence (gaining attention, “controlling” the room)
- improved co-leadership and coordination (planning transitions together)
- increased adaptability and improvisation when lessons didn’t initially “click”
- greater ability to sustain engagement and use advisory time effectively

Advisors Lynne and Jill described watching mentors step into leadership as one of the most meaningful parts of the program:



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They noted the tenderness and care mentors bring to their groups, sharing that sometimes they simply pause to watch students lead. One student, they shared, “found her leadership style”—realizing she didn’t need to be loud or outgoing to lead effectively. As she spoke, peers naturally leaned in.

“I wanted to be in her orbit.”

Freshman-reported outcomes (end-of-year survey, n = 122): Freshman feedback suggested meaningful progress in belonging and engagement indicators. Among respondents, 89.4% reported joining at least one club, sport, or school activity by year’s end. Freshmen also described mentors supporting goal-setting and confidence (e.g., “helped me think of goals,” “made me feel included,” “gave me advice”).

What this suggests: Across teacher and freshman perspectives, the program appears to be building not only connections for ninth graders, but also a student-led leadership pipeline in which mentors develop real facilitation and relational leadership skills over time.

Areas for Continued Growth

Freshman feedback also points to two improvement opportunities that can strengthen consistency and student experience:

1. Increase perceived authenticity and personalization of sessions. Some freshmen requested more conversation-based connection and less routine delivery (e.g., “talked more,” “less like a robot,” “more freedom,” “more hands-on activities”). A next step is strengthening mentor-led personalization while maintaining the structure that supports program fidelity.
2. Clarify and strengthen academic support consistency. While many freshmen cited goal-setting and study support, some noted limited academic guidance. A refinement opportunity is ensuring all advisory groups receive consistent, practical academic support (course planning, study strategies, help-seeking pathways) alongside relational connection.

Implications for Practice

The findings from Newburyport High School illustrate a broader principle in youth development: meaningful outcomes are not produced by isolated programs, but by **intentional systems that combine structure, relationships, and opportunities for students to lead.**

Across multiple data sources—mentor reflections, teacher observations, and freshman feedback—the mentoring model demonstrates consistent patterns of impact. Students reported increased confidence, improved communication skills, and stronger leadership identity, while freshmen described greater comfort, connection, and engagement within the school community. Behavioral indicators, such as participation in clubs and activities, further suggest that mentoring contributed to students becoming more integrated into school life.



Importantly, these outcomes were not the result of informal connection alone. They emerged from a **structured, student-led system** in which leadership is explicitly taught, practiced, and reinforced. Through the integration of a leadership course, a train-the-trainer model, and embedded mentoring experiences, Newburyport has developed a sustainable approach that builds both relational connection and leadership capacity.

This approach aligns with research indicating that mentoring programs are most effective when they combine consistent structure with opportunities for active participation and skill development (DuBois et al., 2011; Rhodes, 2020). By positioning students not only as participants, but as facilitators and leaders, the model moves beyond traditional mentoring to create a **leadership pipeline within the school community**.

The impact of this system extends beyond individual relationships. By strengthening belonging, developing leadership skills, and increasing student engagement, mentoring becomes a lever for improving overall school culture and supporting Portrait of a Graduate outcomes.

Ultimately, this case study highlights a shift in how schools can approach mentoring. Rather than relying on adult-led initiatives or one-time interventions, schools can build systems where:

- Students lead
- Relationships are intentional
- Leadership is practiced, not just taught
- Belonging is experienced daily

Looking Ahead

With three years of sustained implementation, Newburyport High School continues to refine and strengthen its mentoring system. Future efforts will focus on:

- Deepening facilitation and discussion skills among mentors
- Strengthening consistency of implementation across advisory groups
- Expanding opportunities for student-led personalization and connection

The goal remains clear:

To create a school where every student feels known, supported, and capable of leading, and where leadership is not limited to a few, but developed across the entire student body.



References

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