

Redefining College Readiness: Purpose Beyond Performance

A Case Study at Stanton College Preparatory School

Background

Stanton College Preparatory School is a historic public magnet high school in Jacksonville, Florida, serving approximately 1,200+ students in grades 9-12 within Duval County Public Schools. Founded in the late 1860s as one of Florida's first schools for Black students, Stanton has grown into one of the nation's most academically rigorous college preparatory programs.

Today, Stanton offers an extensive selection of Advanced Placement (AP), honors, and International Baccalaureate (IB) coursework, along with dual-enrollment opportunities and a culture that emphasizes scholarship, leadership, and service. Students navigate demanding academic schedules while participating in a wide range of extracurricular and civic opportunities, ranking Stanton in the Top 25 magnet schools and Top 100 schools in the United States.

Yet Stanton's mentoring success is not a byproduct of academic selectivity or high performance.

It is the result of intentional design.

From the outset, school leaders approached mentoring not as a feel-good add-on, but as a structured leadership system; one that supports transitions, strengthens belonging, and distributes responsibility across students and staff. Leadership is embedded into daily practice, not reserved for titles or resumes.

Stronger Connections Grant: District Support for Student Belonging

Stanton's mentoring work is supported through Duval County's participation in the **Stronger Connections Grant**, a federally funded initiative established under the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act and administered through Title IV, Part A (Student Support and Academic Enrichment).

The grant prioritizes:

- Safe and supportive school environments
- Student connection and belonging
- Mental health and wellness supports
- Evidence-based mentoring and relationship-building strategies



In Duval County, Stronger Connections funding supports mentoring and student leadership systems across **24 High Schools and 18 Middle Schools**, ensuring students have consistent, relationship-based support structures that strengthen engagement, safety, and academic persistence.

Ignite’s near-peer mentoring framework aligns directly with these goals by equipping students themselves to serve as trained mentors and leaders — increasing connection while building internal capacity rather than relying solely on adult intervention.

This alignment allows mentoring to function not as an external program, but as a sustainable, school-owned system.

The Challenge

Like many academically rigorous schools, Stanton identified several challenges:

- Ensuring every incoming student receives consistent support during key transitions
- Designing mentoring that fits real scheduling constraints
- Avoiding reliance on a single staff champion
- Creating leadership opportunities that are meaningful, not symbolic
- Maintaining equity so every student begins with the same foundation

As advisor Lashawnda Casper-Reynolds shared:

“We had to submit the foundation first — how we were going to do it, when we were going to do it, and how it was going to roll out before anything started. Being organized is the key to this program being successful.”

This mindset shaped every implementation decision: structure first, sustainability always.

The Model: Advisor-Supported, Student-Led

Stanton implemented Ignite’s mentoring framework with clearly defined roles that protect both relationships and longevity.

Advisor Role

- Facilitate and support the mentoring environment
- Provide guidance without controlling student leadership
- Ensure consistency across classrooms

Student Leadership Role

Executive Mentors



- Train the Trainer: Executive mentors are intentionally selected and trained in July

Essential leadership & life readiness skills (public speaking, conflict management, facilitation, servant leadership, personal development)

- Executive mentors plan, train and lead Mentor training camp
- Facilitate monthly mentor training
- Build intentional relationships within the 1:5 ratio (1 Executive Mentor: 5 Mentors)
- Plan informal mentee connection opportunities & events

Mentors

- Mentors are intentionally selected and trained in August
- Students own communication, reflection and follow up with the identified group of mentees (*All 9th graders - 350 this school year*)
- Build intentional relationships within the 1:5 ratio (1 Mentor: 5 Mentees)
- Promote, attend and connect at informal mentee connection opportunities & events

As Advisor Casper-Reynolds described it:

“[As the] advisor [I am] here to support and guide, but the students are the ones leading.”

Casper-Reynolds directly called out the importance of following the Ignite system. By design, **agency lies in the hands of the students**; an element critical to their success.

An Added Layer: Chief Executive Mentors

While Ignite’s core model includes mentors supported by executive mentors, Stanton intentionally added a third leadership tier to further distribute ownership and strengthen sustainability.

In addition to executive mentors, Stanton established a team of **Chief Executive Mentors** — students who oversee specific operational functions that keep the mentoring ecosystem running smoothly.

Each chief owns a defined responsibility, such as:

- Communications and marketing (social media, video-documentation, storytelling, promotion)
- Logistics and scheduling
- Note-taking and process-level documentation
- Training preparation and lesson customization
- Liaison roles coordinating directly with advisors

This added layer of executive mentors and beyond transforms mentoring from a single initiative into a **student-led system**. Rather than a few students carrying the work, leadership is scaffolded:



- Chiefs support executive mentors
- Executive mentors support mentors
- Mentors focus fully on relationships with mentees

The result is an ecosystem where responsibilities are distributed, skills are practiced in real time, and leadership capacity grows at every level.

Students learn to plan, delegate, communicate, and make structured decisions, not hypothetically, but through authentic roles that matter.

Importantly, this protects what matters most: mentors remain free to prioritize connection and belonging, while operational leadership is handled by the chief and executive teams.

By layering leadership intentionally, Stanton ensures mentoring is not dependent on any one student or adult. The system sustains itself. Stanton stands as a clear example that implementation fidelity matters — when students are trusted with real responsibility, agency grows, belonging deepens, and leadership development mirrors the very college-ready skills the school values most.

Mentors as a Leadership Pipeline

Ignite Mentors are not symbolic leaders — they are trained, trusted, and accountable.

Key components include:

- Structured interviews and intentional selection
- Identification of strengths and leadership styles
- Clear expectations for preparation and follow-through
- Regular reflection cycles

Students consistently described leadership through mentoring as something practiced, not performed:

“After we go into classrooms, we reflect on what worked and what needs improvement.”

This continuous improvement cycle reinforces mentoring as **applied leadership**, not volunteerism.

Equity at the Center

One of Stanton’s most meaningful outcomes is how mentoring supports equity.

Rather than allowing prior experiences or access gaps to persist, the system creates a shared starting point for every student.

As one mentor reflected:



“Ignite is making it so the people who maybe had to take a couple steps back are taking steps forward — and we’re all starting with the same foundation at the same place.”

Mentoring becomes a mechanism for belonging, confidence, and opportunity — not just support for a select few.

Structure That Makes It Sustainable

Stanton’s mentoring success is not tied to one year or one leader.

The system includes:

- Weekly executive mentor meetings
- Bi-weekly leadership coordination
- Monthly mentoring sessions
- Clear communication loops between students and advisors

This consistent cadence allows flexibility without sacrificing reliability; a hallmark of sustainability. When schedules shift, the structure remains.

Conclusion: Leadership in Practice

In an [interview with Stanton’s Ignite Chief Executive Mentors](#), leadership consistently surfaced as something lived, not labeled.

One student described returning to her home country during school breaks and applying what she learned through Ignite to teach and mentor older adults in her community. The facilitation skills, confidence, and structure she practiced at Stanton traveled with her.

Another Chief Executive Mentor, preparing for a pre-med pathway, shared how coordinating peers, leading meetings, and managing responsibilities through Ignite set him apart from classmates. He spoke less about titles and more about trust — being counted on by others.

Both echoed the same sentiment:

Leadership isn’t something you wait for.
It’s something you practice.

At Stanton, students don’t simply participate in mentoring — they run it. They sustain it. They improve it.

The result is a culture where leadership is structured, shared, and continuously developed.



This case study demonstrates that sustainable mentoring is not dependent on high-performing students or ideal conditions. It thrives when systems are thoughtfully designed, roles are clear, and students are trusted with real responsibility.

When structure meets trust, belonging follows, and leadership becomes part of everyday school life.

About Ignite

Ignite partners with schools to design and sustain student-led mentoring and leadership systems that strengthen culture, support transitions, and build leadership capacity. Through structured peer mentoring, students practice the very skills schools seek to develop: communication, collaboration, adaptability, critical thinking, and personal responsibility.

Stanton's implementation represents one of many contexts, across districts large and small, demonstrating that sustainable mentoring is achievable when leadership is intentionally designed.



References

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