

The Benefits of Mentored Pathways  
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I have chosen to participate in Mentored Pathways program because of the unique opportunity it gives my students to learn 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills in an online environment. I have worked with online mentors for twelve years, and it has really enriched the educational impact of my classroom curriculum. My role as a teacher in the program is to set up schedules, modify the plans to meet the needs of my students, guide students through the project plan in class, and communicate regularly with the mentors. There are many educational benefits to having students work collaboratively with online mentors, and I have seen tremendous growth in their skills in planning, collaborating, writing, using technology to research and communicate, and goal-setting through their participation in the process. Three of the major benefits students receive by working with online mentors include the development of a portfolio of their work, an understanding of the importance of career and education planning, and insight into the importance of developing a professional network.

Each student's portfolio developed through the Mentored Pathways Career and Education planning project includes written interaction with mentors, authentic evaluations of research and personal resources available, interviews from professionals working in their fields of interest, a personal mission statement, presentation products, and a career and educational plan of action to help guide them towards their education and career goals. Students collaborate with their mentor to develop their portfolio over the course of a semester, and mentors assist by suggesting resources, proofreading their work, sharing professional advice and experience, challenging, guiding, and encouraging them to meet assigned deadlines. Just knowing that someone besides their classroom teacher cares enough to work with them on a regular basis is encouraging to teenagers, and the final portfolio represents the ongoing communication, research, goals, and products developed throughout the duration of the project.

The career and education research project requires students to consider their education and career interests and develop a plan of action. Each of my students completes this project the first time they take my class in order to help expose them to the process of online, collaborative learning in a safe environment. Developing a personal career and education plan in collaboration with their mentor early in high school enables my students to thoroughly explore education and career opportunities, clarify their goals and interests, and identify areas for future study. In subsequent years in my class, students continue working towards their career and educational goals by exploring topics of interest in depth and developing focused, authentic products to present to an appropriate audience. The career and education project also helps them gain insight into realistic educational requirements necessary for real-world jobs in an increasingly demanding, technologically-based global economy.

Another important benefit of the program is the opportunity to begin developing a professional network while in high school. With the help of their online mentors, students develop interview questions and reach out to professionals that they have identified through online research as individuals who are working in their fields of interest. Both the mentors and I further assist with this process by reaching out into our own personal and professional networks to identify individuals who might be able to share pertinent information with the students.

Receiving interview responses from professionals really helps give the students insight into the preparation, educational requirements, challenges, and rewards of working in their field of interest. Professionals who take the time to respond to student interviews truly make a difference in student motivation and it helps students understand what it will take to reach their goals. Sometimes we get responses from professionals working in high-visibility positions and sometimes we get responses from those who are working in their field out of the limelight. Every single interview response is very helpful, and leveraging the professional network through online interviews is an excellent way for students to learn and grow. The process of reaching out to professionals for interviews continues to serve students well throughout high school because they understand the importance of obtaining meaningful, candid, up-to-date information and realize that there is a whole world of opportunity waiting to be explored outside of their own school and community.

Mentoring makes a positive difference in the lives of my students, and I am delighted to offer the Mentored Pathways program to my students!