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Students mentored through e-mails

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What do you want to be when you grow up?

It's the question hanging over the heads of most Basehor-Linwood High School seniors as graduation looms in the near future.

But, a pilot program through YouthFriends called e-Mentoring is helping to ease the minds of many and provide a source for advice as they prepare to make that difficult decision, along with others, in the next step of their lives.

Students in Michelle Vielhauer's honors English classes were recently matched up with community leaders and other professionals based on the student's interest in a certain career field, then they e-mail each other back and forth, asking and answering questions about those careers.

YouthFriends director, Tammy Potts, said the program is sort of a modern version of pen pals and is designed to help students focus on good writing and communication skills and networking.

"They'll e-mail back and forth through a very structured Web site," Potts said. "We're asking students to really look into their souls and find out what makes them tick. What do they want to be when they grow up?"

Made possible by a \$500 grant through Kansas YouthFriends, students and their mentors communicate through a site called beta MentorMail. Each mentor goes through a screening process before being matched with a student and the nature of the site allows Vielhauer and Potts to monitor the e-mails to ensure appropriateness. Students are given class time during the week to focus on the project and while they've only been exchanging messages for a few weeks, students are already understanding the value of having that extra source.

Senior Charissa Beeves, who plans to major in oboe performance and creative writing in college, and her mentor, Amy Link, director of the Kansas Mentors program, jumped right into the basics when they began writing back and forth.

"A lot of it has just been about getting to know each other since we just started a few weeks ago," Link said. "We've kind of discovered that we both enjoy reading and creative writing, so we've kind of shared some of those passions."

Beeves said she also asked about Link's job, how she got it and what she did to prepare for the interview process.

"It helps to have somebody to ask questions about what to do," Beeves said. "And, you don't have to worry about asking them those questions because that's what they're there for."

Other matches have begun to delve a little deeper into not only the career field, but also college life in general.

Austin Hunter, senior, who has been accepted to nursing school at Creighton University, was a natural match with

Doug Bittel, a molecular biologist and medical researcher in genetics at Children's Mercy Hospital and a member of the Basehor-Linwood school board. Hunter knows the medical field will be challenging and while he asked Bittel questions about the career field, he said the most valuable questions and answers reassured him that it was possible to choose this difficult path and still have a life outside of school.

"Even though it's really hard and you have to stay focused, he (Bittel) still participated in intramurals," Hunter said. "He didn't lose site of being a kid."

"I appreciate that he's worried about that," Bittel said. "Having aspirations like that mean you have to be very dedicated, but you're only 19 and 20 once. It would be a shame to miss out on all the fun you should be having at that age. I'll tell him it's not easy, but you know, nothing that is worthwhile is ever easy."

Potts said another thing several of the students are discovering through the program is that many of their mentors were late bloomers, who decided to go back to school or switched career paths later in life.

"It's comforting to the students," she said. "There's that slow transition, so they don't feel like they have to have everything figured out right after graduation."

The students and their mentors will finally meet face-to-face during a banquet at the end of the month. They will then complete a survey to help give the budding program a boost for future generations. Potts said she hopes to not only continue the program, but also expand it to all seniors.

"I knew not only would it be an amazing experience for the students, but it would also provide a stepping stone for the future," she said about starting the program. "It would be wonderful to match every student up with somebody. I would love to be able to offer it to every graduating senior."

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