

SUPPORTING ONLINE LEARNERS: MICHIGAN MENTOR PROGRAM CASE STUDIES



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Acknowledgments

Thank you to the mentors who made time for a long phone interview – and a follow-up or two. You gave graciously and generously so that administrators, educational decision-makers, teachers, parents and guardians, other mentors, and – most importantly – students across the country could understand better how some of Michigan’s effective mentor programs operate and the important contribution mentors make to students’ academic and personal success.

Lyn DeCarlo, Coopersville High School
 Jay Miller, DeWitt High School
 Danielle Beller, East Grand Rapids High School
 Brendan Howard, Gull Lake High School
 John Burnett, Houghton Lake High School
 Mary Lafrenz, Mattawan High School
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Leona Hein, Niles High School
 Leisha Shaler, Saginaw Arts & Sciences Academy
 Kim Killinger, Stockbridge High School
 Joseph Wenzel, Stockbridge High School
 Julie Howe, Three Rivers High School
 Jonathan Logan, Three Rivers High School
 Susan Rathburn, Three Rivers High School

Like the students they serve, mentor programs share some features but have unique attributes as well. One size does not fit all, and it doesn’t have to. Read on to see how these mentors do it.

Notes:

Another outcome of this project was the development of *Mentor Fundamentals: A Guide for Mentoring Online Learners*, available free at <https://mvlri.org/resources/guides/mentor-guide/>. *Mentor Fundamentals* fills an important void for schools where professional development and assistance has been lacking. It includes helpful practical, research- and experience-based best practices for school employees or parents who provide on-site support for online learners. Much of the content represents the shared conceptions of the mentors interviewed for this report and covers mentor roles and responsibilities, proven practices that lead to increased student success, and common concerns about pacing and communication issues. The guide also includes a section that highlights the research conducted around mentoring online learners.

This project, subsequent research, and ongoing feedback from practitioners in the field confirm the need for continuing focus on and investment in the mentoring of online learners. Moving forward, *Michigan Virtual* is committed to investing in mentors and supporting districts and schools by providing timely information, resources, and services designed to strengthen mentor programs and practice.



ABOUT THIS STUDY

Selection of Mentoring Programs

The project was undertaken to describe what mentoring looks like in a particular school, develop a set of profiles that illustrate the range of mentoring programs across the state, and provide points of comparison for mentors, instructors, administrators, parents, and students about alternative support structures and strategies for online learners. *Michigan Virtual* Customer Care, Sales and Marketing staff familiar with schools and programs across the state suggested mentor programs along a continuum, representing small rural to large suburban schools, part-time para-professionals to full-time certified teachers, and individuals relatively new to mentoring to those with multiple years of experience. The mentors and mentoring programs profiled in this report enroll students in *Michigan Virtual* courses; some use other providers as well.

Our intent is to:

1. Document what 10 successful online mentoring programs look like,
2. Develop a collection of Michigan's Best Practices for Mentors based on contributions from successful mentors,
3. Summarize what mentoring programs have in common and what sets them apart, and
4. Provide examples to those developing their own programs from schools that share their characteristics.

A set of over 30 questions was used to gather information about the programs to fulfill the objectives mentioned above. (For more information about methodology contact mvli@michiganvirtual.org.)



Interview questions were developed to:

1. Understand the roles and responsibilities of local supports, defined as "mentors" in the State of Michigan;
2. Understand how mentors can best help students prepare for online courses;
3. Identify effective mentoring strategies as described and practiced by those interviewed; and
4. Gather ideas and best practices to share in a guide for mentors and those creating mentoring positions or programs.

Individual profiles have been prepared that describe:

- Who the mentors are,
- What they do,
- The logistics of what they do,
- How they build rapport with the students, and
- What their experience has taught them that would be helpful for others to know.

The mentors shared information about their relationships with administrators, students, and parents; the common challenges of working with high school students and challenges specific to working with online learners; and the benefits brought to many students because of online learning options.

The case studies represent variety in staffing configuration, how mentor time is allocated, mentor preparation, mentor experience, program size, and student demographics. See Table 1 for more information.

Table 1. Information about Schools and Mentors During the 2013-14 School Year

Geographic Location of School	# of Students	# of Mentors Interviewed	Mentor Gender	MI Certified Teacher	Years Mentoring	Average Number of Mentored Students
Suburban	1,100	2	Female Female	No Yes	5 1	400
Urban	700	1	Female	No	1	140
Small Town	650	1	Male	Yes	2	100
Midsize Town	800	3	Female Female Male	Yes No No	6 2 2	400
Urban	700	1	Female	No	8	53
Suburban	950	1	Female	Yes	7	80
Small town	800	1	Male	Yes	6	300
Rural	470	2	Female Male	No Yes	1 1	55
Rural	1,000	1	Male	Yes	2	70
Suburban	960	1	Male	Yes	12	50

Programs are staffed in five ways:

1. full-time mentor
2. full-time teacher assigned to mentor a couple of periods a day
3. teacher acting as mentor in addition to a full-time teaching load
4. administrator as mentor of record with part-time paraprofessional providing face-to-face mentoring
5. counselor as mentor of record with counseling center staff or paraprofessionals as daily contact point for students



PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Mentor Preparation

None of those interviewed had had any specific preparation for being a mentor nor had they participated in any organized professional development prior to the interview, outside of what they created for themselves. Some said their administration would support professional development if there was something the mentor wanted to participate in, but there is no substitute system for mentors like there is for teachers and many schools have only one mentor or one mentor available at any given hour. If the mentor has no on-site mentor support and, therefore, a mentor isn't present, the program is in violation of the Michigan Pupil Accounting regulations.

Prior to being asked to be the mentor, everyone interviewed was fulfilling some other role at the school, from parent volunteer to assistant principal. Six of the mentors have at least one teaching certification, three have substitute teaching experience, two have master's degrees in Instructional Technology, and four have counseling degrees. Seven have personal online learning experience, although most mentioned they would have benefited from having had more exposure to online learning before becoming a mentor.

Everyone had some kind of work experience in the classroom or with student services (teaching, coordinating, testing), but most had little experience with or exposure to online learning. What they all have is the ability to communicate with the students and establish connections and a supportive relationship with them. They are all driven to help the students succeed.

A few superintendents and principals shared their vision for the mentor program with the mentors, but there was no "How To" resource to guide the development of their programs. They blazed their own trails. Most mentors interviewed reported being provided no documentation to prepare them and no processes in place. While a few stepped into the role as a predecessor moved on, they all report creating some aspects of the mentor program as they go along.

Learner/Mentor Location and Class Time

Students work on their online courses almost anywhere and everywhere: from home to library space to dedicated labs to an in-school cyber café to off-campus sites of their choosing.

The time mentors have to provide support is managed differently, depending on their other responsibilities. Programs with both full-time and part-time mentors most often have dedicated online learning space, sometimes within the media center and sometimes in an assigned lab or classroom. Frequently, students have options to work at home, before or after school, and in different locations in the school. Often access to these options is dictated by whether the student is demonstrating success in the online course by keeping up with assignments and having achieved a grade or passing rate determined by the school. Contact with students ranges from daily to weekly to "as needed." Some mentors reported making a point of checking in with students every day, even if it is just to ask how the students are doing; others reported scheduling time to log into students' courses with them and discuss progress and concerns. Only a few – those with mentoring responsibilities added to their full-time roles – reported seeing their students less frequently than once a week. With few exceptions, even those who do not have direct contact with a majority of students every day, talk with online learners daily.

Those interviewed gave a lot of credit for their capacity to do their job well to the *Michigan Virtual Customer Care Center* – their primary source of support for process and course software questions. The school's IT staff take care of the technology issues that come up with the equipment and the networks, and the mentors routinely comment that they appreciate the assistance and couldn't be successful without their support.



Online learning

Search

Mentor Routine

Because programs were selected to represent the spectrum of what mentoring programs look like across the state of Michigan, we expected to see differences. Variations were reported in the means of mentor selection, the school environment (including student interest in taking online courses as well as colleagues' acceptance of online learning), where mentoring takes place, and access to the mentor. Based on the results of the interviews, mentors have much more in common in how they work with their students than the logistics of their programs might suggest.

Mentors agree that online learning is not for everyone, and they reported that they would like to see students making format choices that are aligned with their learning strengths. They speak of the benefit of providing more opportunities to students; but they believe that to be successful in online courses, some students just need better preparation and a more substantial orientation to online learning than the mentors or the school have been able to provide.

Mentors repeatedly mentioned working with students on two behaviors that are particularly unprepared for: time

management and effective written communication. Warding off procrastination and helping students learn how to allocate sufficient time for their academics in the face of many commitments was widely reported as a constant challenge. Several programs have instituted procedures or mechanisms that seem to result in more students staying on pace. (See Strategies section of each profile.) Many of the mentors talked about helping students develop skills to convey their questions or concerns to their teachers. They expect students to draft communication before the mentor gets involved; however, most mentors reported coaching students throughout the semester about effective email habits.

While the daily routine may differ given the other responsibilities some mentors have, those interviewed all have practical ideas for how to improve the mentoring program as time and resources allow, and they know a lot about the students they mentor. Paramount is the success of students in online courses and the reward of seeing students who have had transformative experiences learning online.

"It works for us."

One size does not fit all. While we know some elements are instrumental in student success – having a relationship with the students, for example – we know that no two programs are alike. Mentors also report the constancy of change; thus, the profiles in this report are a snapshot in time and will not reflect ongoing improvements mentors and schools have been making since the 2013-14 school year, the time of the interviews.

COOPERSVILLE HIGH SCHOOL



COOPERSVILLE
Area Public Schools
One Community. One Campus... Endless Opportunity.

About 780 students attend Coopersville High School located in Coopersville, Michigan, midway between Grand Rapids and Muskegon. The number of students taking online courses fluctuates between 200 and 350 students based on the semester. The students are supported by full-time mentor Lyn DeCarlo. He provided information for this profile.

Who is the mentor?

Lyn DeCarlo holds a teaching certificate in Business Education and several vocational certifications. He also earned a master's degree in K-12 Counseling. He was first introduced to *Michigan Virtual* while teaching alternative education classes at Kellogg Alternative High School in Nashville, Michigan, where he was assigned as mentor to students.

Several years later, when teaching at Coopersville Middle School, a new position was posted at the high school: Online Learning Coordinator. Pete Bush, the principal at the time, had a vision for an online program and thought the mentor role was a good fit for DeCarlo based on his experience and credentials.

What are the foundational elements of the mentor program?

The online program at Coopersville High School was built on a solid foundation. "The principal was a strong advocate. He knew what he wanted. When I stepped in, he had already begun building the program. We met a couple of times over the summer to get ready for that fall, and we prepared a lab space in an accessible location, close to the main office," DeCarlo says.

"Our principal didn't want to put everything in place all at once. He wanted to know what worked and what didn't. He said, 'Whatever we end up with, it isn't going to look like Day One; it's going to evolve.' We had some guidelines and the principal had a good roadmap, but we needed to establish a few policies," DeCarlo explains. "Many people are fearful of anything that involves a lot of change and new experiences. Unless they were in the lab and saw what was going on and how it benefited the students. Now, after several years, they have an understanding of what it looks like and what the students are doing."

Best Practice

"What's best for the student?"

Leadership can play a large part in the success of online learning initiatives. "In our building, the principal's backing of the program addressed the struggle over internal obstacles as we got started." Furthermore DeCarlo credits the students' experience in general and their positive feedback with helping people become more comfortable with digital learning. Student success and requests drove the growth of the program. In fact, they survey the students to get feedback about their experience and discovered that 90 percent felt strongly supported by their online teacher. "They were being successful and more students were asking for more opportunities. The principal said, 'Let's get them what they want.' It has been very positive."

What is the comprehensive job description of the mentor?

DeCarlo describes a good mentor as someone who is dedicated to the success of the students and creates a learning environment that is welcoming, friendly, and supportive, and flexible enough to meet individual student needs. He has classroom management responsibilities, too: he must take attendance, see that rules are followed, and adhere to policy. DeCarlo says, "When I first started at Coopersville, I had only dealt with mentoring small groups in a classroom setting. Now I work with a full classroom taking different classes simultaneously. Over time I could identify what was working and what was not. After tracking things for several semesters, I have a good understanding of when to use certain interventions to help students who are struggling."

Beyond establishing the day-to-day culture of online learning, mentors contribute substantially to students' personal development by helping them advocate for themselves and become independent learners. "Students already have a teacher for help with curriculum. Mentors are the support piece they don't have in their teacher or parents. They provide additional insight and understanding that supports students' online experiences. Students need to know the mentor is there to help them be successful. A mentor really needs to be doing just one job, not trying to juggle between teaching classes and attempting to mentor others."

DeCarlo explains that the mentoring situation would be unique to each mentor and student, but one thing is always true: "You want kids to come to you, not go home and try to troubleshoot alone. Realize that your role is to build relationships. Focus on their needs, and help them be successful."

Where does mentoring take place?

Coopersville High School has a dedicated lab for online learners with 30 desktop computers and seating for 40. All students are issued a laptop or Chromebook. Students work in the lab and at times can use the media center based on how they are doing in their course. DeCarlo keeps students who need more oversight in the lab.

When do students have access to the mentor?

Usually 25 to 30 students work in the lab each hour. Some students are allowed to sign in late at the beginning of the day or sign out early at the end of the day depending on their progress and schedule. DeCarlo's commitment does not begin and end with the school day. "At times when they really need support, you don't want them to feel like there isn't someone to help them so you need to be available on the weekends and evenings."



How does Coopersville High School operationalize mentor responsibilities?

Establishing the routine

DeCarlo says, "Students don't do a lot of what we expect without being told." So at the start of the semester, he passes out his own syllabus that explains day-to-day life in the lab and sets expectations. This includes explaining the rules and policies.

DeCarlo's desk is right inside the door as they enter. The students face away from DeCarlo so he can see all the monitors. Every day, he greets the students as they arrive, allows time for them to log in, and gives any brief reminders or announcements to the group. "I give them a structural start to the day. They like that. I settle them in, get them working, and do a walk-around. It doesn't look like a traditional class. Everyone is doing something different, working independently." Identifying what's important to their success happens early and continues throughout the semester. "I routinely tell them, 'Let me know what you need.'"

Building relationships

"You want the students to be successful, and building a relationship with them affects their success. Make the environment and the experience feel different to them. You need to continue to ask, 'How can I help? What do you need? What's working and what's not?' They will come to you for help." DeCarlo says an important element of that process is consistent contact. He checks in with each student every week. "I ask them to pull up their gradebook, and then I go around to their seats and check it. I like to see the feedback they're getting at the same time." DeCarlo asks the students to come up to his desk

when the conversation requires privacy, but he notes that they like that he goes around to them.

Maintaining contact

DeCarlo sees relationships as key to the mentor's success with online learners – not just the relationship with the students but with parents/guardians and others supporting the learners. "The people who do the counseling, mentoring, and scheduling have to come together and support one another. I use all my resources to meet students' needs, including asking counselors to contact Mom or Dad when necessary." The counselors reach out to DeCarlo, too. "Our counselors send students to me to read up on the courses and look at options."

"I have a lot of contact with parents – more now than when I was in a regular classroom. Typically they're supportive and they follow up. It makes mentoring easy when kids are struggling. About 75 percent of the time, parent contact is about students having problems with time management," DeCarlo says. If he thinks the principal might be getting a call from an unhappy parent or one whose student has a serious issue, DeCarlo always prepares him first.

All teacher email to students comes to DeCarlo, and he forwards the messages to students. "That keeps me in the loop, which is important because typically the email is about something that isn't right. When I get the email, I can have the conversation with the student before the student replies." Another benefit of this process is that the instructor realizes DeCarlo is talking with the student.

Strategies

Support

"The right person for the job has to know he or she is there to help the student. The students already have a teacher for help with curriculum. Mentors are the coaching piece of the puzzle. Take notice of them. Go to them. Pick up on things. Be their support."

Communication

"The students communicate more when they know they're going to get a response. I make sure they know they can email me and that they're going to hear from me that night or first thing in the morning." DeCarlo's quick replies build confidence in the students. "If I can't find the answer, I'll find someone who can. I don't want them to be frantic or frustrated. That affects how they work for the next couple of days."

Connectivity

The students need to know they are not all on their own. "Good mentors send messages to the instructors telling them what we need or what the technical glitch is." When the mentor helps make connections and understands and prepares the environment, the students feel more confident, and, again, they know they won't have to wait for help. "Students feeling well supported is an important structural piece for student success in online learning."

"They're learning a lot about themselves as a learner and getting prepared for being a college student and being responsible for their learning. I'm showing them how to advocate for themselves. 'You didn't get a response to your discussion board entry? Add it to an email to the instructor and cc me,'" DeCarlo advises. "That puts the student in direct contact with the instructor, and the instructor will cc me on the email reply as well so it opens the dialogue between the instructor and me. Students wouldn't do that unless you directed them because they wouldn't be sure what to do. By giving them this extra guidance, you are helping them learn to advocate for themselves. They are also learning how to send a good written message, and they will need these skills in the workplace."



Challenges

My biggest challenge is the end of first semester and the start of second semester when you are doing enrollments and grades for students at the same time. It can be very stressful if you are not prepared for a major increase in student enrollments.

Rewards

My biggest reward is providing opportunity for students. Many students thank me for providing them an opportunity for courses that are not offered in the building or providing them another learning experience that meets their needs.

DEWITT HIGH SCHOOL



About 960 students attend DeWitt High School in DeWitt, Michigan, a suburb of Lansing. Approximately 50 of those students take online courses each semester. They are supported by full-time counselor, Jay Miller, who also acts as mentor. He provided information for this profile.

Who is the mentor?

Jay Miller has had no formal mentor training, but his educational history has prepared him well for the role. He earned an Associate of Science in Architecture, a Bachelor of Science in Education, and a Master of Science in Occupational Education from Ferris State, as well as a Master of Arts in Counseling from Michigan State University. Miller was a Drafting and CAD teacher for 12 years and has been a school counselor for 18 years. He was the Interactive TV Coordinator for a time until the ISD (Intermediate School District) decided to offer *Michigan Virtual* courses.

What are the foundational elements of the mentor program?

With a history of experience in technology and alternative learning options, Miller sees online courses as a 21st century necessity. DeWitt High School's scheduling process helps increase student and parent awareness of the different demands of online learning. "Students need to be self-directed, motivated to work on the subject matter, responsible for staying engaged, and have the discipline to do the work. Many students have had no experience with a learning management system (LMS) and are surprised when they find out they have to do a lot of reading. We've been using an LMS in some of our face-to-face classes to prepare students." Miller says some students and parents think the teacher using an LMS isn't teaching because so much more responsibility falls on the student. "We're helping them understand this is the nature of 21st century learning." Knowing the limitations and advantages of these kinds of courses leads to good decisions about who is enrolled. Students need to be aware that they will interact differently with other students and teachers than they do in a traditional face-to-face setting.

The decision to enroll students in online courses is made by the students and their parents/guardians with counselor support. "We've never had a parent who refused the school's recommendation," Miller says. He provides the students with an expectation sheet that has the *Michigan Virtual Online Learner Readiness Rubric* on the other side. Miller reinforces the expectations for online learners – for example, students are expected to log in every day and account for their time, and they are responsible for keeping up with the pace of the course – and urges students to self-reflect before the final decision is made. In addition, they are advised to have their own laptops they can bring to school. Students can use computers in the media center, but those are not designated for online learners so a class that is scheduled will take precedence. A few Chromebooks may be borrowed but on a limited basis.

Best Practice

"Have a good screening process. Schedule request forms go out in the early spring for the next school year, meetings with students are set up, and we finalize schedules by mid-May. If students show interest in taking an online course, I give them the expectations sheet with the rubric on the back and tell them that they and their parents or guardians have to sign it. At the initial meeting, I spend a few minutes talking about what to consider before making the decision, for example time management, learning style, and required skills. I also show students a list of courses other students have had success with, and tell them they should examine the syllabus with their parents or guardians."

"Online learning is not for everyone. For example, a sharp student may not be a good time manager, and staying on pace is important to student success." Miller suggests that virtual classes may be a good option for athletes and those who have attendance challenges and concerns possibly because of family issues or if they are victims of social media and/or personal bullying. He says, "If a student is missing a lot of days, we sometimes schedule them for Michigan Merit Curriculum courses online. In this situation, we try to ease them back to school."

What is the comprehensive job description of the mentor?

Miller believes mentoring comes close to a professional level experience and that it is important for mentors to have some educational credentials or experience in education. He says the mentor is not just a disciplinarian; they must be good, resilient problem solvers. "Students know when someone is babysitting and when the person is supporting their personal and academic efforts," he says. The mentor must be able to connect with students, engage in dialogue, maintain rapport, and establish an environment of mutual respect. Miller suggests that the most successful mentors are probably those that are already a part of the school and have an established, respected relationship with students. While it may not always be possible, he believes that familiarity may be the most important characteristic of a mentor.

While Miller is the official mentor for DeWitt High School, he has some help. The media center staff usually takes attendance and reports on what students do while they are working in that area. Miller says, "She knows who's supposed to be there and what they should be doing. She's the eyes and ears." Both Miller and the media center staff monitor attendance, login, and progress; Miller does the final grade calculation.

Where does mentoring take place?

Currently, online learners work on their online courses in two areas in the school: the Commons, a large open area with tables and benches, or a classroom adjacent to the library media center or Info Center, as it is called. Students enter and exit through the Info Center so staff can monitor their coming and going. The room also has a hall door that is kept closed; the door is in sight, again so staff can see students moving in and out of the room. A classroom is being renovated to provide a third location. It looks and feels more like a coffee house than a classroom, with an open arrangement of both high stools and larger, more comfortable chairs.

Students taking virtual courses are obligated to be at school unless they can prove by showing their pacing guide that they are up-to-date with their assignments and have earned a 76 percent in the course. Miller observes that students usually prefer to stay at school and work.

When do students have access to the mentor?

Students taking online courses are scheduled in four 86-minute time blocks during the day, but it is rare that all of them are in the room at one time. Until the first progress check has passed and their progress report shows they are on pace, students are required to be in the assigned classroom. Miller looks at each student's account on Friday, and once a week he seeks out the ones who aren't making progress for an informal meeting. He has little contact with the students who are on pace unless they seek him out. Students know they can come to him, and they work with the media center staff as well.



How does DeWitt High School operationalize mentor responsibilities?

Getting students ready

Preparation for taking online courses starts with a conversation about enrollment and the expectation sheet that goes home with the students. Their signature and their parents' or guardians' is required on that sheet before they can be enrolled so it acts as a contract. Miller stresses to all parties that they read the materials carefully and understand the expectations.

Students do not have a formal orientation. The first couple of days of the semester, Miller meets each block as a class. He gives them their login information, and they bring their computers to him so he can watch as they login and begin to explore the course. Some start on their own. He shows them a little about how to get around the system and then lets them go. He reinforces what the responsibilities are for the course and goes into the classroom every day for the first week to field questions.

Students have to stay in the classroom at least until they submit their first progress report or meet the first hard line in the pacing guide. Because of the weekly check-in system, the students know they're getting feedback regularly and whether or not they are meeting the requirements for the course. Most students know that they're being watched and get off to a good start. If a student gets way ahead, Miller lets her/him go.

Establishing the routine

Attendance is taken during each of the four hours virtual learners are scheduled, and students are held accountable for being present (when required) and staying on pace. Students submit a printed progress report in a drop box every Friday or email one to Miller. It's the student's responsibility to provide it without any reminder. Once a student has reached the 76 percent point, the parent/guardian must sign the report in order for the student to be allowed to leave the building. A student's situation can

change every week, and Miller and the media center staff keep up with where each student is supposed to be.

Miller's advice to new mentors is to get off on the right foot. "Be fair and help students understand what they need to know early in the semester. Start them off right and get them going," he says. "Know about your students and be aware of their expectations. Look at the expectations sheet and the readiness rubric where the things they need to be able to do are laid out. Look at their GPA. Look them in the eye."

Building relationships

Miller has been at DeWitt High School a long time so he is well known by the students and their families. The relationship around online learning begins when he is working with students to put together their schedules and the conversation takes place about how they will decide whether a student is enrolled or not.

Important relationships are forged among students, too. "Students benefit a lot from each other even when they're in

different courses," Miller says. "Real rule followers don't know what to do when they're not told what to do. They have to develop self-starting behaviors and make the transition." Sometimes their peers can help in this regard.

Maintaining contact

Miller first meets the parents when scheduling decisions are being made. Further contact with parents takes place if there are attendance issues or the parents have questions. Miller prefers face-to-face contact, but he uses email a lot, whether it's students emailing their weekly progress reports, parent or guardian questions, or connecting with students he doesn't see at school. He talks with parents on the telephone if students have problems. As for contact with administration, the principal sometimes weighs in on the more significant student issues or situations. Once a year, Miller provides information about online learners and the mentoring program within the annual report from the student services department that is presented at the July Board meeting.

Strategies

Attendance

Once they have shown they're in the proper place with the first progress report, have parental approval, or show a 76.5 percent in the course gradebook, students don't have to attend; however, once a week they have to check in to show they're on pace. Every Friday, students must print off and provide Miller with a copy of their progress report page for the week. They can also email him a copy.



Communicating with the instructor

Miller tells all the students in the first couple of days that they can use him as conduit with the online course instructor but they must try communicating on their own first, through email and by using Blackboard. It is rare that a student needs help after a couple of times. He looks over their shoulders to see that they're attempting to take responsibility for their communications and coaches along the way. Every course has its own learning curve. Any change, even a nuance in the system, creates a wrinkle. Miller suggests it's good for the mentor to explore and problem solve – just as the students have to.

Regular check-ups

The gaps on pacing guides can be two to three weeks, which is too long for students to go without check-in. It's better for the student and the mentor to have a weekly progress report.

Challenges

The greatest challenge Miller faces is the time crunch for getting the volume of students enrolled, "But that is the nature of scheduling," he says.

Rewards

Miller sees the benefits of online learning in student growth – personal and academic. "Kids that may be considered marginal by their peers can get into a course and be anonymous and have the coolest learning experience they ever had. Mixing students together who wouldn't otherwise be in the same course lets them see that others can succeed, and they grow from their experiences with each other. Students also grow because they get to take courses we've never had access to before; they have options to do other things. These quality experiences are part of a comprehensive high school program."

EAST GRAND RAPIDS HIGH SCHOOL



Over 950 students attend East Grand Rapids High School located in a suburb of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Forty-four of those students took online courses Spring Semester of 2014 and were supported by three mentors who are full-time counselors. One mentor – Danielle Beller – provided information for this profile.

Who is the mentor?

Danielle Beller has been a counselor for 16 years. She has a master's degree in counseling and a bachelor's degree in English. Prior to becoming a counselor, Beller taught high school English. Several years ago, Beller became involved with online learners. Previously, she had enrolled students in online courses; now the registrar takes care of enrollment, and each counselor is identified as the mentor for any of the 320 students in their caseload who take online courses. The registrar and the counselors help get students started with their online coursework and support them as needed throughout the semester.

The registrar enrolls the students and engages with them frequently because she is the one at the front desk in the Guidance Office where they check in every day. "She knows a lot about the courses, the LMS (Learning Management System), and what students are doing and need to do because she has done it for so long," Beller says.

What are the foundational elements of the mentor program?

"Online learning is not the right fit for everybody," Beller says. "We have to help individuals understand the reality of what it will be for them. Students are the best ones to talk to students about it, so we often include students currently taking online courses in meetings with students who are thinking about it."

The principal holds a meeting in March for students interested in online courses. They receive the initial contract that spells out the guidelines (for example, how to access the course catalog) and a checklist of what they can expect (for example, they have to be proactive about asking for help) and a series of questions they must answer about their academic behaviors related to successful online learners (for example, Are you a self-directed learner?). They are asked to provide a written response about why they want to enroll and a plan for how they can complete activities and assignments successfully and on time. Their parents/guardians must sign off on two forms: the application to enroll in online courses and the approval if the application is accepted. The principal gives final approval, but the student's counselor has to sign, too.

Both the students and their parents must sign a contract that states clearly that taking the online course is the student's choice. It also explains that the student is electing to take a course where there isn't face-to-face contact and everything is done electronically.

East Grand Rapids High School has an established 1:1 laptop program so students are used to having their own device and know how to get assistance. "We have an awesome tech department," Beller says. "Our tech support person is in the Learning Commons and completely accessible to the students. They know where to find him. If he can't help, they go back to the Guidance Office, and we call the help desk."

Best Practice

"We have a teacher on staff at the high school who teaches for *Michigan Virtual*. She has been a phenomenal resource. She helps me understand more about what it's like to be an online instructor and why I get some of the communication I do from the teachers. They're trying to be helpful, but other schools have people who are checking in with students every day. We place a lot of responsibility on the student to get work done."

What is the comprehensive job description of the mentor?

Thus far, the counselors have worked without a formal mentor job description. They have been “figuring it out as we go” as Beller says. Beller views the mentor’s role as liaison between course and student. Furthermore, mentors must be responsive to teachers and parents. Problems are often brought to her attention in an email from the teacher, for example when the student is behind or hasn’t logged in. If the teacher can’t get what is needed from the student, she intervenes; otherwise, the students have a lot of independence. Sometimes a parent asks how the student is doing, and she reviews the student’s status so she can provide feedback. Mentors proctor exams that are password protected. If the mentor gets an email from the teacher that the student isn’t performing, she may forward the email to the registrar so she is informed because she sees the students when they sign in and can communicate with them quickly. Beller sees her fundamental purpose as “doing what I can to help this be a positive experience for the student.”

Where does mentoring take place?

Students are assigned a class period for their online course, but they do not have to work in one specific location. They come in to the Guidance Office to sign in and then are able to go wherever they want to work. Students are encouraged to bring their own device or they can use a school loaner; some desktops are still available at the school, too. Beller says, “We don’t have a classroom so they go to the Learning Commons, the cafeteria, or the hallway where we have benches. Some stay in the Guidance Office. Students can leave the building, too. They can go home, or to Starbucks, or the public library; but most students find a quiet place at school.”

When do students have access to the mentor?

Many students work on their online courses during their scheduled time. However, some use their online course time to finish homework that’s due for other classes or to study for tests. Beller reports that often those students don’t do well in their online courses, but some spend time getting caught up on weekends. For those who are present at school during their scheduled time for online courses, they seek support as needed from one of the counselor-mentors or from the registrar who is front and center in the Guidance Office.

How does East Grand Rapids High School operationalize mentor responsibilities?



Getting students ready

The meeting in March and the materials they are provided prepare students for the expectation that taking virtual courses comes with what may be increased personal responsibility for some. After they are enrolled, the students get an email that tells them what to do, and they follow the directions. If they have questions about logging on and getting started, they go to the registrar or their counselors. Every day the students must sign in at the Guidance Office reception desk and then choose a place to work. Some students who get behind are restricted to working in the office until they complete their assignments. Others – student athletes who travel for competitions, for example – may not always be in school, but are expected to be able to catch up. “The decision is made based on our knowledge of the student,” Beller explains.

Building relationships

At East Grand Rapids High School, relationship building begins when students are enrolled in 9th grade. As freshmen, the students are divided alphabetically and assigned a counselor who works with them until they graduate. Their counselors will

act as their online learning mentors as well. Online learners are primarily juniors and seniors; the majority are seniors. Often, by the time a student takes an online course, the counselor – the mentor – has already been working with him or her for two years.

Maintaining contact

Students send Beller an email if they’re having trouble. “Then I bring them into the office and ask them to show me what they’ve done. I ask them how they have communicated with the teacher, if there’s a time crunch, and what they’ve done so far.” After consulting with her, students are expected to email the instructor and copy Beller. If the student has attempted contact and it’s been a while without a response, Beller will email the teacher directly.

Beller has regular contact with some instructors and finds that some are very good at corresponding via email; others she speaks with on the phone more often. “I appreciate it when a teacher reaches out because there’s a concern and when they respond to me quickly when I have a challenge,” Beller says.

Strategies

Contract

Establishing an understanding of what parents and students can expect has proven very helpful. Beller says having some kind of contract that outlines the ground rules – explaining that online students are not in the classroom, for example – is also a means of opening conversation about how online learning is different and prevents misunderstandings after the students have begun class.



Structure

The counselor-mentors at East Grand Rapids High School have learned from experience that students benefit when expectations are established about the routine. “When students have to sign in, they’re more likely to do course work regularly. Every day. It provides a little more of the structure they need,” Beller says.

Proctoring

Beller finds it’s more efficient when the mentor receives the passwords for quizzes and tests ahead of time. “If the password doesn’t work, you can call the teacher in plenty of time.”

Challenges

Beller says it’s important for instructors and others outside the school to understand that being a mentor is not always the mentor’s full-time job. Sometimes, because of their other roles in the school, mentors are not able to provide the kind of support others expect.

Rewards

Beller finds the relationships she’s established to be the greatest reward of her role as a mentor. “I’ve been able to form relationships with teachers from different places, and see professional relationships with people from a different perspective. Mentoring has allowed me to connect with an *Michigan Virtual* teacher who also teaches at our school in a way that has changed my understanding of online learning.”

GULL LAKE HIGH SCHOOL



Located in Richland, Michigan, Gull Lake High School has about 1,000 students. Approximately 70 of those students took over 80 online courses Spring Semester 2014. They were supported by Brendan Howard who is a full-time teacher and has responsibility for mentoring the online learners. He provided information for this profile.

Who is the mentor?

Brendan Howard has a master's degree in educational administration and is working on his Ed.D. in educational administration. Having done his postgraduate work online, Howard knows firsthand the important relationship between pacing, time management, and successful online learning. He also understands the benefits and the challenges. In 2011, Howard's principal asked him to take on the mentor role for some students doing credit recovery online; he now mentors Gull Lake High School's other online learners. He also teaches French and sometimes Physical Education.

What are the foundational elements of the mentor program?

"When our program started, I think I was not completely prepared for mentoring online learners," Howard says, "But our superintendent has been very supportive of the initiative. It's not a perfect system yet so we have been tackling the challenges as we go." Staff working with students understand online learning is not for everyone. For example, they consider how old the student is before determining whether to schedule the student in the lab or offer the freedom to work at the time and place of the student's choosing.

What is the comprehensive job description of the mentor?

Howard describes his responsibility from the broad – facilitating the education of online learners – to the specific – knowing and acquiring the tools the students need, e.g., software, books, and/or equipment. He is also responsible for classroom management including addressing technology issues, tracking and reporting attendance, reporting grades, helping students sign up for AP testing, and contacting online teachers for clarification about grades.

Where does mentoring take place?

Because of routine space and scheduling demands, Howard moves between three classrooms each day.

When do students have access to the mentor?

Howard teaches French two hours a day and spends five hours a day with online learners. Virtual students have a specific lab time scheduled for a little over an hour per day when Howard takes attendance. Online learners meet during their assigned time in one of three labs with 25 to 30 students in each lab. During the other hours of the school day, they attend their face-to-face classes. The students without specific lab times (because they are scheduled first or last hour) can work from home, come in late, or go home early or just come into school when they need a proctor. These students sign a special contract stipulating they are to work on their course from home. Howard sees the 14 to 20 seminar students – those without specific lab time – once a week on "seminar day" which makes them easy to keep track of. All students are required to check in with Howard once a week.

Best Practice

"Help students get to know the course and the LMS [learning management system] by giving them time and encouragement to play around with them. In the process, they will find where the different parts of the course are and where the resources and supports are within the LMS. Gaining familiarity in this way may also help students feel more comfortable with this very new way of learning."



How does Gull Lake High School operationalize mentor responsibilities?

Getting students ready

Howard finds out what software, books, and/or equipment students need and becomes familiar with the required technology before the courses begin. (For example, he secured a webcam for students taking sign language.) “We have an excellent IT department that has helped ease the burden of installing software and making sure the computers are up-to-date.” He sits down with the students individually and asks what each needs to be successful. “It may be easier for me to understand what their challenges and questions are because I have experience with online learning,” he says. Once the students are in the lab, Howard encourages that they play around with the LMS. “I tell them to start clicking away and find out what each tab does. I give them time to read through the calendar, the syllabus, and the schedule for their course.”

Building relationships

Before class begins, online learners fill out a form that says they will meet with the mentor once a week so expectations are clear that there will be an ongoing support relationship.

Howard finds the easiest way to build that relationship is by being personally involved. Simply put, he routinely asks students to show him what they’re working on and initiates regular dialogue with them.

Maintaining contact

Howard describes communication strategies that are integral to his work mentoring online learners. “Sometimes I help students write an email. They don’t know what to say because they’ve never talked with the person on the other end of the course.” He holds parent-teacher conferences every 12 weeks; in between conferences, he communicates with parents through email. As mentioned above, Howard believes regular personal conversation with students about their coursework is key to establishing a relationship. One of the routine conversation is discussing their progress at the time he is entering grades.

In addition to regular contact with students and their parents or guardians, Howard shares a Google Docs web sheet with some administrators. They can view the records at any time to see the class the student is in, the student’s weekly progress, any email with teachers, and the final grades.

Strategies

Preparation

Students struggle with time management. Howard suggests they need to know a little bit about what they’re getting into before they sign up for online courses. He notes that the successful students are good at independent learning.

Contact

Howard stays connected to the students and their courses through routine conversations. “I just ask them to show me what they’re learning or their current grade. Parents need to know their students can pull up their classes at home, and they should be asking their students to ‘Show us what you’re doing,’ too.”

Lead by Example

“Model new behaviors for the students,” Howard says. “Help them write an appropriate email to the instructor. Fill out the tech support request sheets so they know how to ask for help in the future. Be open. None of us can be afraid to try new things.”



Challenges

Howard’s greatest challenge is a logistical one: “I have to change classrooms throughout the day, so my biggest challenge is making sure we have open computer labs.”

Rewards

Howard cites his greatest rewards as “being able to share my experience with students because I’m an online learner. I know what it’s like from the student point of view, for example, waiting for a response from the teacher.” He has found being part of piloting the new program to be very rewarding professionally and personally. “I love what I do. And because I love what I do, it doesn’t really feel like a job,” Howard says.

HOUGHTON LAKE HIGH SCHOOL



About 650 students attend Houghton Lake High School in Houghton Lake, Michigan, midway between Lansing and the Mackinac Bridge. Approximately 100 of those students took online courses during the 2014 Spring Semester and were supported by full-time teacher and part-time mentor, John Burnett. He provided information for this profile.

Who is the mentor?

John Burnett has a teaching certificate, online teaching experience, and a master's in educational technology. He has been teaching science, including the physical sciences and physics, for seven years, the last four at Houghton Lake High School. The media specialist had been overseeing students taking virtual courses prior to his assuming the mentor role in 2012-13. Burnett had students taking online courses and had been teaching astronomy to Houghton Lake students online before he became a mentor. Except for his teaching experience, he had no specific preparation for being a mentor and has been "feeling it out."

What are the foundational elements of the mentor program?

A few years ago, Principal Brent Cryderman made a presentation to the school board, superintendent, teachers, and parents about the importance of online learning. The board agreed that they should proceed to develop a program, collecting and reporting data and achievement. Cryderman continues to be involved, including the occasional meeting with Burnett, the student, and the parent/guardian when necessary.

His online teaching experience and having students in his classes who are taking virtual courses provides Burnett another perspective of the online learning environment in his role as mentor. He would like to see a technology coordinator or technology integration specialist for the school and a space dedicated to learning technology and online learners. Burnett is interested in developing a technology coordinator position as well and sees elements of that role in mentor responsibilities. Burnett has talked with his principal about the future. He says, "A utopian version would be an area of the school devoted to instructional technology developed like a coffeehouse/lounge, where students would come in and sit at tables to do their work. That would give the learning specialist time to monitor what they're doing, help from the side, and give them some freedom." He also envisions helping teachers incorporate technology in their classrooms from the same space.

Best Practice

"It's very important to be able to put yourself in the students' shoes and listen. Be sympathetic and encouraging – especially with those students who are not doing well. Bring the human aspect into the online world."

What is the comprehensive job description of the mentor?

Burnett describes his role as primarily tracking student progress, determining who is where they need to be and who isn't and communicating with the students – giving them feedback – about where they are in their coursework in person and via email.

Where does mentoring take place?

While Burnett does not have a designated time for mentoring, the students' online courses are scheduled for a particular hour (one hour for each online class). He created a special spreadsheet for attendance that is broken down by class and hour. Every day they are required to initial the sign-in sheet on Burnett's door and then go to the library to do their work during that hour. His hope is that they will be able to create an area in the school designated to online learners where mentors can monitor their progress and support their learning.

When do students have access to the mentor?

Because he has classroom responsibilities throughout the day, Burnett uses email, the lunch hour, and time before and after school and between classes to connect with students. When students are falling behind or struggling, he makes time to sit down and talk with them to determine what the issues are and how to resolve them. Sometimes resolution involves him contacting the instructor, administrators, and/or parents. Once a month he holds a 10-minute meeting in the cafeteria for all the students taking online courses.



How does Houghton Lake High School operationalize mentor responsibilities?



Getting students ready

Counselors at the high school are responsible for discussing the students' expectations and the nature of their commitment to taking online courses. Before they are enrolled, students meet with the counselor to review the online learner contract and sign it.

Building relationships

In the four years he's been at Houghton Lake, Burnett has come to know the student body and the community and the demands of meeting relationship needs. He says, "I track students down, we sit down and talk. If they are behind, we talk and figure out what is going on so we can resolve the problem. Are they communicating with the instructor? Do I need to call the instructor? I will."

Maintaining contact

Although Burnett uses email to connect with students when necessary, most contact is face-to-face. "I catch them in the hallway to tell the students who are on pace or ahead what a great job they're doing," he says. Burnett finds the students who are struggling and has a conversation with them. "I remind them I'm still here. I tell them, 'I saw you were behind' and I ask what's going on two or three times, and then I call home and try to make the parents aware of the issues. I also communicate with instructors if I have a persistent problem." Sometimes resolution involves Burnett contacting the instructor, administrators, and/or parents/guardians.

Strategies

Working with Parents/Guardians

Parents and guardians are important members of the online learner support team. Most Houghton Lake High School parents are open to online learning so many students take virtual classes. Burnett encourages parents/guardians to monitor students. For classes other than those that qualify as 21f, "They have to pay if the student fails. If they asked to see grade pages, they would know where the students were and wouldn't be mad when they find out that the students aren't doing the work."

Pacing

Deadlines are important. Burnett would like to see more structure in pacing. "If students had hard set deadlines maybe in thirds or quarters, that would make it easier – especially nearing the end of the year. I remind them of deadlines coming up and talk about how many are behind. I remind seniors if they don't pass, they will have to pay any extra cost for their class, and they might have to make up the credits."

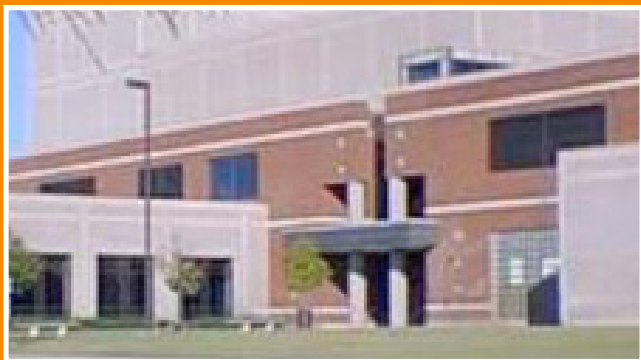
Challenges

Burnett identifies procrastination as the primary challenge for the students he mentors; thus, he would like to see more hard deadlines for student assignments. Motivating students who are not doing well is also a challenge. "Since you're not the teacher, you have no authority over the course and assignments so trying to be the support on the side has its limitations and challenges." He has two students that are fully online and not present. "One girl I've had in class has experienced some trauma in her family and given up on high school, but she wants her diploma. I've tried to motivate her via email to be successful. She passed four of five classes first semester."

Rewards

The greatest reward is when students complete their course successfully. Burnett cites the same student who had given up on high school. "She seemed so happy when she made it through those courses first semester," he says.

MATTAWAN HIGH SCHOOL



Mattawan High School is located in Mattawan, Michigan, near Kalamazoo. Approximately 1,100 students attend the high school, and over 400 took online courses during Spring Semester of 2014. Those students were supported by one full-time and one-part time mentor. Mary Lafrenz and Sherie Manzo provided information for this profile.

Who is the mentor?

Mary Lafrenz began working as a mentor at Mattawan High School because her children were students there. Initially, she was a tester for the Special Education program; but after a year, she was asked to be a mentor for the online learning program. Lafrenz, a former preschool teacher, still helps with Special Education reading tests, but she has been the mentor at Mattawan for five years.

In October 2013, Sherie Manzo, part-time paraprofessional, was placed in the Instructional Media Center as an aide to help students using the library and to assist Lafrenz with supporting online learners. She has a bachelor's degree in chemistry and biology and secondary teaching certification in both.

The librarian is also a member of the online learner support team, assisting the mentors and students as needed.

What are the foundational elements of the mentor program?

When Lafrenz started, the program had 49 students. Spring Semester 2014, they had 467 enrollments. Twenty students take multiple courses online, but no one takes more than three.

What is the comprehensive job description of the mentor?

Lafrenz says her primary responsibilities as a mentor are "being here" for the students. The mentors help students with their classes, address technical problems they have with their computers, and assist them in communicating with their teachers. Lafrenz also enrolls the students in the courses and counsels some of them. "I select the teacher for each student. I know what the teachers expect. I know the ones who like how I work, and I know the teachers I like to work with. I put all the students with the same course with the same teacher. Because of the relationship I have with the teachers, I can call them when a student has special needs."

Not all the interactions between Lafrenz and the students are about their online coursework. "Some contact is related to behavior. If the students are too friendly or if they don't get along, I have to move them. We think of it as crowd control."

Although Manzo has responsibilities as a media center aide, she spends a lot of time with the online learners. She takes attendance, keeps them on task, and helps with general academic and skill-based questions or specific questions in areas she's familiar with.

Best Practice

"The key is having a relationship with the students. They have to trust you and like you. If you can't relate to them, it would be very difficult."

Where does mentoring take place?

Mentoring takes place in the library where they have 82 computer stations. Many students bring their own laptops. The space is full throughout the day with 75 to 127 students in the library at one time.

When do students have access to the mentor?

Lafrenz and the school librarian are present in the library throughout the day; Manzo is there for five hours each day.



How does Mattawan High School operationalize mentor responsibilities?

Getting students ready

"The course starts with an email from instructors that explains the rules for class – for example, some don't allow notes, some take points off an assignment if it isn't done on time – so the first day of the semester we go through the protocol about how the class runs, what the rules are, how to log in, and how to find announcements. We go step by step. It's such a large group that we assign students who have already taken courses online to help the students who are new to it," Lafrenz explains.

Establishing the routine

A typical session begins with taking attendance. The balance of the hour is spent making sure the students are doing their work. If students are on target with their online coursework, they are allowed to do other homework. If students need to communicate with teachers, mentors provide support and encouragement. Lafrenz explains that because the mentors are not always familiar with the content, it is often difficult to help with coursework, but they do the best they can.

Building relationships

Lafrenz established relationships with many of the students as the mother of their classmates. "Many of these kids are my children's friends. They come to my house so I've gotten to know them," she explains. "It's important for the mentor to get to know the students. Be personable. They need to know they can ask you questions." Lafrenz shares another connection with the students: she has been an online learner. She recommends that everyone associated with the program take an online course so they can understand what the students experience. She realized how important immediate feedback is when she had to wait to hear from her online instructor.

How Manzo interacts with students "depends on their personality and needs." She reviews the students' grades, tells the ones that are doing well on their own that they're doing a good job and spends little time with them. She checks in more often with those that are struggling with motivation.

Maintaining contact

Lafrenz sees part of her role as helping to interpret instructor feedback and comments and mediate the students' response because they can be very sensitive. Lafrenz says, "I will call the teacher to follow up if the student isn't comfortable, but I try to get the student to communicate first. Some feel there isn't a real person at the other end, or they're worried the teacher will get mad or won't respond. The students are encouraged to send messages to the teachers through the learning management system, but the teachers won't see it if they don't log in. Students don't have the patience to wait so I'll email the teacher at their personal email if I have to."

Manzo says, "Most students are familiar with online learning. It's more about getting parents oriented because they're not very familiar. In fact, they often think mentors are teaching the classes." Manzo establishes contact with parents/guardians by sending a letter at the beginning of the semester explaining some of the differences between traditional and online classes that sometimes create misunderstandings. She suggests two features in particular that are new concepts for parents: grades aren't handled the same way as they are in a typical class; and student work may fluctuate because there are not as many hard and fast deadlines. She also sends an informational email about how to view their students' grades with the necessary password and writes to those whose students' class grades are below 60 percent. She routinely answers questions through emails and telephone calls.

Strategies

Supporting the Instructor

Because she has previous experience with many of the instructors, Lafrenz feels she can vouch for them and directs students to read through the assignment before they jump to conclusions about the instructors' intent or what they are trying to convey. "When students feel the teacher isn't approachable, they think they don't have to do the work. Sometimes the students interpret the comments as if they're being punished or yelled at. They don't like that. I say, 'Maybe they're being nice, and you just can't hear them.' I try to help the student interpret the comments from the teacher's point of view." Often the students haven't read all the way through the assignment or the feedback so Lafrenz goes over the assignment with them, points out the rubric, tells them to look further into the course for more information, and repeats her perspective on the teacher.



Communication

"I'm here to help them when they need it," Lafrenz says. "Several work independently. I walk around. I don't talk with each student every day; but once every four weeks, I talk with every student. Some students take courses at the college and can do their online course at home. They still have to drop in once a week to tell us how they're doing."

Challenges

Lafrenz said she takes it all personally, but she advises others not to. It's a struggle. She asks, "If you don't have a passion for it and don't take it personally, how do you encourage the students?"

From Manzo's perspective, it is student resistance to structure and the struggle with being accountable for their work that is most challenging. Without more than grade checkpoints, students can put off work indefinitely. Manzo says, "It's difficult because we're not the teacher, yet we're expected to have control. We have no control over how exciting the lesson is. If they're bored, there's nothing you can do."

Rewards

Lafrenz says, "I see it as a personal achievement if they all pass. They know I'm disappointed if they don't."

She remembers a student who had never passed a class and passed both of the virtual courses he took. "All I did was show him that I cared. He did the work; I just sat next to him. Caring about them is important, and that includes the teachers, too."

Manzo says her high point is "working with students that wouldn't normally be doing so well or are not motivated and somehow you break through."

NILES HIGH SCHOOL



About 700 students attend Niles High School located in Niles, Michigan, in the southwestern corner of the state. Approximately 140 of those students took online courses Spring Semester 2014 and were supported by one full-time mentor, Leona Hein. She provided information for this profile.

Who is the mentor?

When Leona Hein became the online learner mentor in January 2013, she was running the in-school restriction program, the goal of which is to keep students in school who have made a bad decision. Hein has a degree in Business Administration and was previously a general K-12 substitute teacher. She is the third mentor for the Niles High School online learner program.

What are the foundational elements of the mentor program?

Niles High School has been offering online courses for over a decade. Initially they had a lab dedicated to online learning using one course provider for credit recovery during the school year and during the summer. The teacher who was present in the lab served as a supervisor more than a mentor. In 2009, the decision was made to include more providers and develop a more progressive, collegiate atmosphere for students. Fine-tuning of the online program and the mentor position continues.

Mentoring begins before the student is enrolled. The mentor plays a role in helping the student to select an online course that will either fill a core requirement or suit the student's college and/or career choices. Hein says, "As our mentor program evolves, I hope it becomes a combination of advisor, technology aide, tutor, and liaison between student and online instructor. The mentor should also be helping the school online program to be a dynamic one, adjusting policies and constantly watching for new courses and programs that can allow our school to offer new options and solutions to our students while maintaining fiscal responsibility."

What is the comprehensive job description of the mentor?

Hein fills her role as mentor by getting students enrolled in the right class, supporting them through the semester, and communicating about their online learning experience with parents, teachers, and administrators. She initiates her role with students by talking with them about what courses they need to graduate, what they like, what they want to study in college, and what prerequisites they need to fulfill. She then works with the assistant principal to set up the students' schedules. She enrolls students in *Michigan Virtual* courses and meets with them as needed throughout the semester.

Where does mentoring take place?

Online learners at Niles High School report to the Hunter Lab, established with grant funds. During the 2012-13 school year, the room was equipped with 30 Macs and was used for online learning only. In 2013-14, another 22 computers were added and half of the room made available for teachers to use with their classes. Because Niles has open campus privileges, juniors and seniors with a grade of 75 percent or above who are on pace to complete the course can work on assignments wherever they choose, including the school's cyber café.

Best Practice

"Currently [2013-14 school year], students who have a 75 percent or above and look like they will complete the course on time aren't required to come to the lab every day. If they fall behind when they aren't in the classroom, I have a hard time tracking them down. I'm changing the policy for 2014-15 so the students have to come in every day until they are finished with the class, then they get open class privilege."

When do students have access to the mentor?

Online learners meet in the Hunter Lab at their assigned class time scheduled during one of six periods throughout the day. They sign in with Hein and log into their class, and Hein helps where needed. Under special circumstances, she meets with students before or after school.



How does Niles High School operationalize mentor responsibilities?

Getting students ready

Hein has no standard orientation materials. “I would like to have something to hand students the first day of school, including log in and text book information. That hasn’t happened yet, but I get closer every semester,” she says. Early in the semester, Hein shows students how to log in, access the discussion board, and submit assignments – all things they haven’t done before. She directs them to see what the rules in the class are and to explore the course site by opening all the tabs.

Establishing the routine

With 20 students in each class period, Hein has time to check in with each student if necessary. She works with students on assignments and online research, and she helps them build their writing and other employability skills. Beyond the one-on-one academic support, Hein advocates for students when they make a mistake and will facilitate contact with the instructor or help desk when they need additional assistance. She also conferences with teachers, calls parents/guardians, and enters grades.

Building relationships

Hein has an advantage over many school personnel. “Most often I know students from seeing them in the halls. But I have five children so I’ve been to a lot of student events, and many already know me.” She has another important advantage. “I love this job. And I just like the students. I like to interact with them. We have conversations. I lean over their shoulders, and we talk about what they’re doing.”

Maintaining contact

Hein communicates weekly with the principal, two assistant principals, the technical high school director and assistant director, the athletic director, and counselors about student progress so they always know who’s doing well, who needs a wake-up call, and how to determine eligibility. At certain times of year, she has weekly contact with support staff as well. Additional interaction may take place because of behavior problems, usually because students are failing. When there is a problem with attendance or they get behind, she emails the students. She then contacts the principal so arrangements can be made for a meeting with the student. She stays in touch with parents or guardians by phone or email, some of whom want a grade report each week.

Strategies

Communicating with the Instructor

Usually if students have a problem, they send an email following the protocol established by the course instructor. Hein assists students in composing the emails if they need support or are not getting a response in a timely manner. If the instructor doesn’t respond within the established timeframe, the students send an email and include Hein as a cc. “Sometimes that increases the priority of a response,” Hein explains. “But I tell the students to realize that teachers may be teaching in a classroom, too, and suggest they not ask questions instructors need to respond to so quickly.”



Easy Reference

Hein keeps course descriptions in a binder with a table of contents so students can look them up without interrupting their coursework.

Challenges

Procrastination is the greatest challenge. Hein gives students a speech about working hard and finishing early. She plans a celebration to honor those who have finished and hopes it will serve as incentive to those who have not kept on pace.

Rewards

Hein cites her greatest reward to be seeing kids graduate who wouldn’t have been able to without online options. One online learner had to recover English credit and stayed every day after school. Hein drove her home. The student’s mother told Hein she was the best teacher her daughter had ever had.

SAGINAW ARTS & SCIENCES ACADEMY



About 700 students attend Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy in Saginaw, Michigan, northeast of Lansing. Approximately 50 of those students took online courses during the Spring Semester of 2014. Those students were supported by full-time mentor, Leisha Shaler. She provided information for this profile.

Who is the mentor?

Leisha Shaler has been a presence at Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy (SASA) since 2001. She started out as a parent volunteer, was eventually asked to coordinate afterschool activities, and then became the Living Arts Coordinator. As the coordinator, "I brought people in to provide examples to children that you can do what you love: you can be a lawyer and a singer," Shaler says. In 2006, she was approached to become the full-time mentor.

Shaler has an associate degree in education and worked toward a bachelor's degree. Given the various responsibilities she'd had at SASA, administration saw she was well suited for the mentor role. "I'm not strong in technology," she says, "But the classes are so well set up, and everything is so easy to find, it hasn't been a problem. I'm good at old school things like making a connection with the instructor. From the beginning, you need a feeling and a face to put to the class or it doesn't seem real."

What are the foundational elements of the mentor program?

The Center for Arts and Sciences was a half-day school for many years. In 1999, it became the Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy and a full day school. SASA offers concentrations in math, science, global studies, and the arts. Half the students' day is focused on their area of concentration and half on the other courses they need. The online program started out slowly, with just a few students. Previously, the librarian had acted as mentor. Administration had also assigned a teacher to each online course; they wanted students to be able to ask questions of a teacher in the building because they believed students would feel more comfortable knowing they could ask their question and get a response right away. "When SASA became a full day school and the population grew, we didn't have a lot of options to keep students here and satisfied," Shaler explains. In 2006, the principal, Janet Nash, approached Shaler. She believed a presence online could be as valid and as valuable for students and teachers as a classroom experience. Nash wanted to make a strong start with a new approach and thought SASA required a designated lab for online and college dual enrolled students.

Since that time, Shaler says, "Students have been taking everything *Michigan Virtual* has to offer, and they can take courses from the local college and community college, too. The school is very small and doesn't offer a lot of electives. *Michigan Virtual* opens that avenue for students to pick up classes without having to leave the building."

Best Practice

"We're teaching more than one lesson."

What is the comprehensive job description of the mentor?

The foundation of Shaler's approach to mentoring is a relationship with the students built on trust, support, and predictability. Because online learning feels very different from traditional classes and daily interaction with a person face-to-face, she says it is important the students know "I always have your back, I am always here." In addition to online learning support, Shaler assists with academic and creative skill development. "I'm also mentoring students in how to present themselves and teaching them to take responsibility. I want them to be able to express themselves. Be themselves." She is both a sounding board for ideas and a source of feedback for performance. She is an interpreter as well. "They don't always say exactly what's on their minds. You have to get a sense for it." Sometimes that takes the form of connecting students to services and resources at school. "We don't wait to see if a student needs tutoring; we have that in place. I know the kids and the classes they have. I already know where I'm going to send them if they need support I can't provide."



MICHIGAN VIRTUAL
LEARNING
RESEARCH INSTITUTE



MICHIGAN
VIRTUAL

Where does the mentoring take place?

In the beginning, students taking online courses went to the library. “There were always people coming and going, and teachers would hold classes in the same space. The students didn’t have a home base.” Then the PTA invested in a lab specifically for online learning equipped with 20 computers. Many students have their own laptops, but some online students don’t have access to a computer at home so Shaler has to find ways to address that.

When do the students have access to the mentor?

Online classes are treated like any other class and scheduled for an hour. Sometimes students come to the lab outside of their regularly scheduled time to keep up with courses. With two days’ notice and a valid reason for being behind, Shaler will keep the room open and stay after school or work during her lunch to accommodate the students.



How does Saginaw Arts & Sciences Academy operationalize mentor responsibilities?

Getting students ready

To introduce students to this new learning experience and to familiarize students with their course, Shaler tells them, “Get into your class and push every button. Open all the tabs and see how the learning management system (LMS) works and what pieces of the course structure are where. *Michigan Virtual* classes are set up so well that the students get loosened up and they can navigate themselves.” The returning students play a part in acclimating the first-time online students. “I always have a student who has had an online class so at the beginning of the semester, I match newbies with the experienced ones for the first week and seat them in the same area of the lab.”

Shaler realized that she could work with everyone and still personalize students’ support if she scheduled them differently. “I had 16 students taking sociology. In the future, I’m going to schedule students taking the same class at the same time whenever I can. That way I can talk with them as a group – read the online teacher’s instructions, go over the syllabus and pacing guide – and then sit with students individually and build that one-on-one relationship.”

Establishing the routine

“I pull their *Michigan Virtual* classes up every Monday. We look at the grade sheet together and see what they have done, what their score is, and if they’re behind or ahead.”

Building relationships

Shaler puts effort into developing a relationship with parents because they are new to online learning, too. It begins with the *Michigan Virtual Online Learner Readiness Rubric*. “The readiness rubric is wonderful. You’re holding something in your hand you can show to parents and help them understand that students have to treat an online class with the same respect they give a class with a teacher standing in front of them. If the students act like their online course is not as important, that the others are a priority, I talk with them and call their parents or send a letter explaining that the class needs to be treated with the same respect because it counts toward the students’ grade point, too.”

Shaler discovered an opportunity to deepen her connection to the students while addressing one of the great challenges to online learner success: time management. Very early in the semester, she creates a master calendar, noting dates for big events, performances, breaks, and SASA deadlines. “I make a calendar for the entire semester, including dates for the science fair, dress rehearsals, and presentations they have to do. I add preparation time for events – for example blocking the month before the science fair to focus on that. I felt like we weren’t connecting all along the way because I hadn’t personalized the calendar. Now I create one for each student within the first two weeks. The individualized calendars let every student know I am talking directly to them.” Shaler adjusts each person’s calendar according to the requirements of their concentration. Then, “We pull two weeks out at a time and figure out what they have to do every week. They know they don’t have a whole semester to complete their course because of their other academic obligations.”

Maintaining contact

Shaler found that if there isn’t anything on semester reports, parents don’t treat the course with the same respect. To address that issue, students write a short letter to their parents, telling them the number of points they’ve earned in the class, how many weeks they have to finish, and where they are in the course. “I handwrite a little note and staple it to the report card,” Shaler says. This strategy creates the expectation of and opportunity for the students to take responsibility for their actions. Equally important, their parents see what has to happen at the mid semester point when they still have time to address the issues.

Shaler recognizes how important it is to connect with the course instructor. “Forming a relationship with the student at the beginning of the semester helps me help the student establish rapport with the online instructor, and that is beneficial to everyone.” Students often need direction in how to communicate with instructors. One instructor sent out an email about how to email him. “I asked the students, ‘What should we do to be sure

we follow his guidelines?" The answer was to print it out and tape it to the top of their laptops." They may ask her to send their online teacher an email about points they've been given on an assignment. "I tell them, 'This is your issue.' I want them to be able to express their own thoughts. I help them understand how to make the presentation or argument and write a respectful email. I explain that if they approach the issue properly, the instructor will probably award the points they're after."

"For the students, there is safety in knowing you can ask your question right away and get an answer," Shaler says. Typically *Michigan Virtual* instructors get back with students quickly, but Shaler is there every day to assist in making contact with the instructor if necessary. She appreciates proactive contact. "Some of the best instructors let me know if they have concerns about a student's performance. Not just at progress checks. It helps both of us to help the student."

Strategies

Time Management

Shaler's master calendar and the students' personalized versions are her time management tools. "The calendar helps to reduce problems I might have down the road and lets the students know I see them as individuals. They help me snag senioritis early, too. The students figure it out, and we tend not to have many problems. They're very hard workers. We have the best and brightest. They're very busy and very quiet."

Beyond the Classroom

Shaler still uses her interest in and experience with the Living Arts Coordinator position she held previously. "We bring the class into the community and the community into our life," she says. From art exhibits to math competitions, students can talk to their instructors about the other activities that are part of their lives. "I try to connect the classes to something happening in the community. It makes a big difference to the students, and the *Michigan Virtual* instructors are very open to it. For example, students take film and directing classes. The students email their instructors telling them we are having a film festival. I ask the instructor, 'If I let you know about the student attending, will you acknowledge it?' And they do. The students receive acknowledgement for aspects of their academic and extracurricular life outside of their online courses."

Proctoring

"I require students take their quizzes or tests at school. They have to tell me when they start and when they're done. I need to be able to see their screen, and I walk around to see how many screens are open. It's a flat, basic rule, and everyone is on even ground."



Challenges

"One aspect I have to be diligent about is cheating. I come down hard when I think things aren't right. I want them to know they can fail if they get caught."

Rewards

"My reward is my great relationships with the kids, seeing how much they grow, how much maturity you see in them from September to June, how they become self-motivated. And knowing they've learned behaviors they can carry on to other aspects of their lives, specifically using a calendar and planning. I hear them say it!"

STOCKBRIDGE HIGH SCHOOL



Approximately 500 students attend Stockbridge High School located in Stockbridge, a rural community midway between Lansing and Ann Arbor in mid-Michigan. Approximately 50 of those students took online courses Spring Semester of 2014. While Joseph Wenzel, assistant principal, is the mentor of record, those students received day-to-day mentor support from two part-time aides. Kim Killinger has primary responsibility for the *Michigan Virtual* students, and she provided information for this profile.

Who is the mentor?

Assistant Principal Joseph Wenzel is the mentor of record at Stockbridge High School; Kim Killinger has primary mentoring responsibilities. She graduated from Stockbridge High School, earned an associate degree in accounting, and a bachelor's degree in accounting, business leadership, and business management. Because it allowed flexibility with her family, she spent nine years substitute teaching in the district, including time subbing in the library, before taking the mentor position. Killinger is married to the varsity football coach at the high school, too. Having been part of student activities for so long gives her visibility and credibility with students and parents.

The librarian oversaw the online learners before Killinger became mentor. Because she subbed in the library, Killinger was already familiar with what the online learners had to do and had been interacting with them. The principal originally approached her to be the mentor because they needed someone in the library who had a lot of presence with students to assist the librarian in managing the online learners and addressing their needs. Killinger's history in the district and relationship with teachers, parents, and students made her a likely choice. When Killinger is not working with online students, she still performs library duties, such as answering day-to-day questions about library resources.

Another factor that contributes to Killinger's fit as mentor is her own digital learning experience. "I took some online classes and used Blackboard when I was in school so I know the dedication it takes and the time commitment you have to make to take an online class," Killinger says.

Best Practice

"I don't go around to everyone every day, but we talk as they come and go. Not a week goes by that I don't talk with each student at least once."

What are the foundational elements of the mentor program?

The online learners at Stockbridge High School receive support from a team of people. Assistant Principal Wenzel, who has a counseling background, resolves serious issues with students, addresses major concerns they might have, and enters their grades. The school counselor develops students' schedules and enrolls them in online courses. The guidance counselor registers the students and determines what students may not be well suited for online learning. Killinger, classified as a library aide, works with the guidance counselor on the paperwork students taking courses online are required to do and is primarily responsible for the day-to-day mentor functions. She also takes care of the nine-week progress reports and semester end grading and passes the information on to Wenzel to review and post.

Some of the students learning online at Stockbridge High School are taking AP courses. Because of the way students are scheduled, they take online courses on the days they need a class to fill the block in their schedule. They also have students who want to take a class not offered at the school, such as a world language.

What is the comprehensive job description of the mentor?

Killinger and the other library aide are with the students daily, have access to their grades and can monitor how they're doing, make sure they're on task, and collect progress reports. The mentors are not responsible for answering students' technical questions. "The mentor's role is to be there for and support the students," Killinger says she also teaches the students a variety of skills, ensures resources are available to help them succeed, helps them employ those resources, and encourages the students to be responsible, independent learners.

Where does mentoring take place?

Students taking courses online meet in the library, using some enclosed areas and the computer lab with space for 28 students set up on one side of the library. An overflow area provides an additional six to eight stations. *Michigan Virtual* students have first priority for the computers, although other students have access to those that online learners are not using. The enclosed spaces are available for those that need to be separated from the group, and they have a few smaller laptops. "Our online students are in the library. It's an open environment where others come and go. We may put students in a room by themselves if they need it," Killinger says.

When do students have access to the mentor?

Students taking *Michigan Virtual* courses are in the library every day, meeting during four blocks throughout the day with as few as two students in one block and as many as 25 in another. Even though Killinger is only present Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, someone else is there on Tuesday and Thursday to see the students stay on task. If students have questions or issues when she's not there, they go to Assistant Principal Wenzel, email Killinger, or wait until the next day.



How does Stockbridge High School operationalize mentor responsibilities?

Getting students ready

Before students are enrolled in an online course, they have some tasks to accomplish. They must look up the prerequisites for the *Michigan Virtual* course they want to take and print out the information. They have to select the class they want, find the course description, print it out, and get their parent's/guardian's signature on the document. The school also sends a form home that the parents/guardians must sign. The students take an assessment to see what kind of learner they are, and they take the self-evaluation quiz ("Is online learning for me?"), print out the results, and give it to the counselor. They have to read about taking online classes and write a short statement addressing the points that are relevant to their learning style, for example, what will be easy for them, what they will need to work on, and how it relates to their learning style or study habits. They must print out their personal statement, sign it, and get their parent's/guardian's signature. This strategy helps students see what it is like to work with materials online and gives them a framework for reflecting about their choice. Killinger says, "Some students decide after this process that an online course is not for them, and decide to opt out. Some students also find that the particular class they've chosen is not a good fit, and will choose an alternate course."

Before students can register for the course, they have to have taken any prerequisites. Sometimes a teacher who has had the students in a class weighs in on the decision about whether the student

will be OK in an online course. Once approval has been granted and the student is enrolled in the course, parents and students pursuing online learning options receive a packet. "We send them an agreement form, information about the online learning environment (including classroom rules and harassment rules – our own and *Michigan Virtual's*), and a contract the parents have to sign," Killinger explains.

Establishing the routine

Before the semester begins, students taking online courses attend a group meeting to introduce them to the day-to-day operations of digital learning and to take care of paperwork. After the classes start, Killinger and the library aides make sure students are on task and check their progress and their grades on their *Michigan Virtual* account daily. Two or three times during the nine-week period, Killinger prints out their progress reports and gives the students their copy. The students are directed to print out their own record every week. If they're procrastinators, she talks with them one-on-one frequently. She lets them know when they're in danger of falling behind and need to spend more time on their assignments outside of class. Throughout the semester, students turn their progress reports in to Killinger every Friday; she gives an extra percentage point when they do. She leaves it up to the students to initiate contact with their teachers so they learn to take responsibility, but she will email the instructor, too, if the students need help because they're not getting a response.

Building relationships

As a Stockbridge graduate, Killinger has a personal connection to the school and the community. She usually knows the students she mentors. Many have been in classrooms where she's been a substitute. Others she knows from K-12 district athletics, being involved in the community and the district, and because students' siblings are friends with her own children. Still, she

puts effort into developing rapport. "I work on building trust and relationship. When I know there's a problem they're struggling with, I talk with them. I make sure they know I'm here to help." Proof of her availability is that she maintains daily contact – in person and via email – when she's not at school.

Strategies

Orientation

"Once they get their login, we encourage students to go through the course, to browse and look around." Killinger has already familiarized herself with the courses before the class starts so she can provide further assistance.

Personalization

"It's difficult to get students to do things when they're supposed to. Each instructor provides a pacing guide. Students are required to print out two copies. They keep one for themselves and give the other one to me. Before they give me my copy, the students identify what they need to have done and apply dates to the assignments and activities to help keep them on pace. Some use it; some don't."



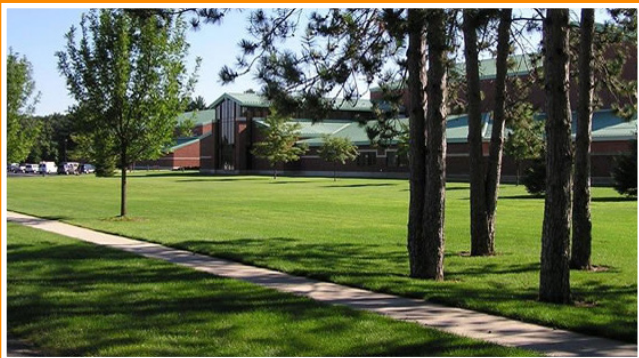
Challenges

"Students don't realize how in depth and involved an online course is. They may not be completely truthful with our prerequisite assignment. Coupled with the procrastination problem, many need help with motivation, and we struggle with seniors who wander from the online course challenge second semester, too."

Rewards

"I love to see students succeed – really taking pride in what they're doing – and knowing I had a piece in that. Seeing the students be motivated and recognize the time they have and use it is very satisfying. They don't realize that they may not need to work outside of school and that 90 minutes may be all they need. I have several conversations every day about this very thing."

THREE RIVERS HIGH SCHOOL



About 800 students attend Three Rivers High School in Three Rivers, a small community located in southwestern Michigan. They had almost 400 enrollments in online courses Spring Semester of 2014. Those students were supported by three full-time mentors: Julie Howe, Susan Rathburn, and Jonathan Logan. They provided information for this profile.

Who is the mentor?

The Three Rivers mentor team represents diversity in educational preparation and experience. Julie Howe is certified to teach business and technology and earned a master's in educational technology from Michigan State University. She designed and taught blended learning classes which increased her interest in online learning during her master's research. Howe has been at Three Rivers since 2004, started mentoring in 2008, and was recognized as Teacher of the Year for her district while she was a full-time mentor of online learners in 2012.

Jonathan Logan was a student at Ferris, working toward a teaching degree in English before he moved to the area. When he was in high school, he took French from *Michigan Virtual*, and he has had online and blended courses in college.

Susan Rathburn studied elementary education at Western Michigan University. She was a substitute teacher in Three Rivers for 13 years before becoming an online mentor at Three Rivers High School. Her youngest child was one of Howe's early students. All of her children have had online or blended learning courses in college. She enjoys working with technology and believes online learning is an important option for students, and especially valuable for students continuing in post-secondary education.

"We are a diverse set of personalities with the same philosophy. We have different approaches and styles, and we all work very hard. We have 800 students in our building. There's always a fit for every one of those kids," Howe says.

The mentor team works with the online instructors, the *Michigan Virtual* Customer Care team, administrators, counselors, teachers, and parents or guardians to provide whatever support students require to be successful. Collaboration with the school's technology department has grown since Howe first began the mentoring program. "Good mentors are great troubleshooters, but we have a great tech team, too. We've developed relationships and that has helped because tech support is critical to a functioning lab. When technology works, it's a good day."

What are the foundational elements of the mentor program?

Howe had been working with online learners for about seven years when she had a group of students whose needs weren't being met at the school. Those needs included scheduling conflicts due to dual enrollment, requests for special courses not offered at the high school, and credit recovery. Parents were asking for something beyond what the classroom could provide. The next year, they had enough interested students for a section of online learners, and Howe became a full-time mentor. "We were a successful program, with five or six sessions a day for online students. That lasted about four years."

The Three Rivers online program expanded exponentially in 2011-12. "We had so many students who wanted to take online classes, we didn't have enough room, and I was the only mentor at the time. We had to start using previous success as criteria for enrollment," Howe explains. Fortunately, the school was able to hire two additional mentors for the 2012-13 school year. In

Best Practice

"The Pacing Guide is the key to success for us and for our students. We use it at grade conferences to show expectations and that we are where we need to be. Communication with the online instructor is a key to success."

2013-14, each mentor has over 100 students throughout the day. One mentor can have students taking between 12 and 20 subjects during one class period.

The online learning program at Three Rivers is driven by student need. “We do what is best for them. The demand for online learning is there. That’s why we’re taking it into the middle school. We have a need for accelerated learning,” Howe explains. “Students want to take high school classes so they can do dual enrollment. We’re focused on merit curriculum in the middle school with the opportunity for students to take online classes with a highly qualified instructor, teaching quality content aligned to content standards. We get a full load of quality for every standard on every topic. And the kids are getting it. Not all students are online learners. The courses are challenging and rigorous. It’s tough for some of them. But for those who are ready, online learning gives them control over their environment and independence.”



“We’re a dynamic program. No two semesters or school years are alike. Change is a constant. We remain flexible. We just keep moving forward. Our students benefit from that. We’re a dynamic program. Our vision was and is to ensure that students have opportunities outside of the normal classroom and that we are able to identify and accommodate their educational needs. We’re offering classes they can’t get at school or in the district,” Howe says. “I will advocate for them. I will use my network to help them be successful inside and outside the classroom.”

What is the comprehensive job description of the mentor?

Howe says, “The mentor training program was built on hard lessons I learned and mistakes I made.” She came in three weeks before school began in 2012 and gave a crash course in Powerschool (a student information system), record keeping, the courses, grading, and the structure of *Michigan Virtual* courses – particularly the pacing guide. “Initially, my emphasis was on communication with students, parents, and the *Michigan Virtual* instructor, but I learned the reasons for record keeping and having mandatory grade conferences with students once a week early on.”

The official title for mentors at Three Rivers High School is On-Line Classroom Coordinator (OCC). Howe provided a job description:

The OCC is responsible for assisting students with online enrollment and providing academic support, ensuring the site is functional and conducive to a positive learning environment, monitoring students assigned to their lab, answering general questions, and ensuring students are engaged in activities that promote their academic progress. In addition to having excellent listening and conversational skills, the OCC must:

- Ensure the lab is open and accessible during class hours;
- Ensure that all computers are functioning properly and students have access to the academic resources needed to achieve their educational goals;
- Monitor computer activity to ensure students are using the Internet for educational purposes and are not accessing inappropriate websites;
- Maintain communication with parents, counselors, and administration as necessary;
- Establish rapport with students and encourage students to succeed academically;
- Ensure students complete courses in a timely manner based on their ability; and
- Complete required paperwork as necessary.

Rathburn summarizes an average day. “We’re keeping our finger on the pulse; we’re looking over a shoulder at the screen; we’re watching how long it takes to do an assignment. We help students interpret their assignments and find resources.”

Helping students learn other skills while taking an online class is also a mentor’s responsibility, Rathburn notes. “Our primary goal is to get them to pass the class and make sure they’re learning, but students need new skills that are different from what they need to take a class where someone is standing in front of them. They have to learn to take responsibility for their learning – how to search through assignments, find announcements, communicate well with their instructor, and advocate for themselves.” These new behaviors and skill development have implications for their future. “Becoming a self-directed learner helps them to go on in vocational education or college.”

Where does mentoring take place?

Each mentor has his or her own assigned lab space dedicated for online learning. They take academic integrity very seriously. To ensure the student is the one doing an assignment or taking the exam, students are seated at assigned computers. Howe says this is a big help with classroom management. “If there’s an issue with an assignment, we can easily follow up. Students know it’s their space and they have responsibility for it. We have LanSchool software so we can monitor the computers in the lab and, at any given time, see 30 computers. We can block access to games, control the screen, and see key strokes to look back and see if they’re where they should be and recover lost assignments.”

When do students have access to the mentor?

For each course they’re enrolled in, students are scheduled for an hour in the lab. Because some students have no technology at home, Three Rivers has implemented an after school lab.



How does Three Rivers High School operationalize mentor responsibilities?

Getting students ready

Preparation for being an online learner begins with a frank conversation during enrollment about the students’ reasons for taking classes online and about the realities of online learning. At the beginning of the semester, they have an orientation program to emphasize the foundational elements for a successful online learning experience. The framework is set by sharing classroom expectations with the students which include a description of the student, mentor, and online instructor’s roles. Mentors walk students through an introduction to their course in Blackboard and give them practice navigating. They give them time to explore the features, and they explain the pacing guide and its importance in keeping up with the course and completing it successfully. They show the students where and how to send messages to their instructor and how to get help. The orientation also covers netiquette, and the students practice the principles by sending emails to their mentors.

Establishing the routine

The mentors regularly track grades on Blackboard. “That’s where we begin the conversation, congratulating students who are doing well, talking through any problems, and developing an intervention when necessary. We’re behind the scenes monitoring progress,” Howe says. “We communicate with the instructor if we don’t understand.”

“We remind them every week where we are in the semester and make sure they’re keeping track on paper – the pacing guide – and on the computer,” Rathburn adds. “We encourage them to get ahead.”

Some daily mentor tasks look very similar to the traditional classroom situations. “Often we have to explain the assignment and assess if students don’t understand the directions or the

content,” Rathburn explains. “The answer may be as simple as printing the course rubric and going over it and the instructions together. Sometimes we have to Skype with the instructor and the student. We make phone calls during classroom time, we use screen captures, and we have conference calls when it’s in the student’s best interest.”

Building relationships

“Everybody’s equal in the lab. We have all levels of student ability, which makes a big difference. Student diversity in the lab is one of our keys to success,” Howe says. “It’s a peaceful place. A welcoming, safe space where there’s no bullying.”

“It’s a misconception that students learning online don’t have human relationships,” Logan says. “The mentor provides that relationship. We help them out. We build trust. We work with them every day. They look at us as teachers.” Each mentor has students assigned to them during the day; they do not rotate students – unless they find through discussion with each other that another mentor is a better fit. “We have ownership of our classes, and we build that relationship from Day 1. We give them a survey that helps us decide what our approach will be. For example, we ask if they have Internet at home and if they’re here because they want to be.”

Howe says, “We look at every student and the entire educational situation and consider the possibilities with online learning. If we’re having a conference about some academic issue, we pull up other classes to see if there’s a place where we can intervene.” The mentor team reaches out to others who have an impact on the student. “We instituted a multi-tiered system of support: we see the child or student in his or her entirety and not just our class. We work with other teachers in the building, we help seniors with college applications, scholarships, and financial aid. We provide a lot of support.”

Strategies

Professional Learning Community

The mentors communicate with each other daily, and they meet once a week as a professional learning community (PLC). The PLC provides the mentors the opportunity to establish a set of norms for their work. They share best practices and their difficulties and successes, support each other, problem solve, and make continuous improvements in their program together. They attribute their success with students in part to their close working relationship with each other.



Logan says, “We are successful because we’re collaborative, we talk about what’s in the best interest of the student, and we operate with transparency. I’m not afraid to tell someone when I can’t do something. We follow through on what we promise, and we are supported. It’s the environment at the school. We’re a ‘yes’ school, and we do what is best for our students. I make sure the student is successful in my classroom which leads to success in other things at school, and that increases their chances of being successful in college and further on.”

The mentor team also stresses the importance of connecting regularly with the online instructor and immediately when an issue becomes apparent. If a student has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), or 504 accommodations, the mentors work with the online instructor to set learning goals for the student. If the instructor is not a good fit, the mentors will make changes that are in the best interest of the student.

Intervention

Logan attributes student success to Three Rivers’ multi-tiered intervention system. “If a student is struggling, we have our PLC and a team of people to go to. We call on Julie [Howe] for support with the students, and we can call on our administrators. We call the parents and note our conversation in a log so administrators and counselors can see that the parent has been contacted. When a student has an IEP, we involve a caseworker if necessary. Very few kids fail.”

At Risk Population

Howe reports that 73 percent of Three Rivers’ students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. “A lot of our high-risk population need another adult who cares about them academically and emotionally. They need to know we’re there for them. The online mentors are responsible for their substantial improvement and for finding a course that engages them and fits their needs, abilities, and learning style.”

Challenges

“Students who do not come into the lab.”

“The lack of technology at home.”

“Technology issues at school. (This has gotten better with time, but the first few years were rough.)”

Rewards

In short, student success. Giving students learning opportunities that they may not have had otherwise. Giving students options and control over their learning environment. Seeing students succeed after failing in the classroom. We helped teenage parents with twins graduate, and now we’re helping them with job applications. Both will walk across the stage this year. They are not the only ones who graduated despite great challenges.

Notes:

1. For the 2014-2015 school year, Jonathan Logan transitioned to the position of Dean of Students at Three Rivers High School. A new mentor was hired two days before school started which was a challenge for all. With the help of experienced mentors and our PLC, our newest mentor worked diligently and it has been another successful school year.
2. Our middle school program has been a success this year with the addition of a new mentor and the reassignment of a middle school technology teacher who also mentors.

MENTOR ADVICE TO ADMINISTRATORS

“Approximately 93 percent of my students who have taken an online class said they enjoyed their experience and would take an online class again, and approximately 95 percent of my students felt extremely supported by their online instructor. These learning opportunities are enriching student learning and growth.”

Occasionally the mentors identified superintendents as the driving force behind online programs and the development of mentor capacity. More often it was their building principals who initiated the programs. The mentors spoke appreciatively of the willingness of their administrators to explore online opportunities and engage in developing solutions to ongoing changes — including making their support known throughout the school and sometimes defending online options.

The broad question, “What advice would you offer to administrators about online learning?” yielded four general suggestions:

1. **Be involved.**
2. **Support the mentors.**
3. **Understand the opportunity.**
4. **Provide structure.**

Be involved

- Understand 21f.
- Know the mentoring program.
- Keep in touch with what the students are doing.
- Participate in orientation for students and parents.
- Build broad support among staff.
- Address internal obstacles.
- Address the fears, for example staffing and technology gaps.
- Find out what works and what doesn't.
- Understand the importance of all the student support systems – e.g., counseling, registrar, special services, teachers, mentors – and bring them all together.
- Support the mentors and the students.
- Visit the online learning space weekly to see firsthand what the mentor and students do and to show the students you're interested.
- Ask to see who's doing well and who needs a wake-up call.

“I'm very lucky. My principal couldn't be more supportive. If students are behind, and I can't think of any other way to help, I send them to the academic counselor who sits together with the student to figure it out. If that doesn't work, the principal talks with the student.”



Support the mentors

- Ask for programmatic input from the mentor(s).
- Provide learning resources.
- Support professional development.
- Understand how time consuming it is to mentor successfully.

"Mentors should be full time. You have to be available on the weekends and evenings. You don't want students to feel like there isn't someone to help them."

Understand the opportunity

- Know why online learning appeals to some students.
- Know why a student belongs in an online course.
- Acknowledge that students can learn online.
- Acknowledge that not all students are online learners.
- Establish that online courses are as valid as any other class taken during the day.
- Know the limitations and advantages of courses.
- See that online learning experiences are part of college and career readiness.
- Understand the impact of giving students independence and control over their learning environment.
- Be aware that online courses are rigorous and are just as difficult if not more challenging than traditional classes.

"Johnny has a deaf uncle but can't take sign language because we don't offer it. All you have to see is that online courses open the opportunity to extend to kids learning something they otherwise wouldn't have access to at school. So many higher education programs are going to online or hybrid instruction. We need to expose students to curriculum and experiences they don't have access to before they are paying thousands of dollars at college."

Provide a structure

- Establish expectations and responsibilities for mentors.
- Share preliminary guidelines and structure for the program.
- Identify dedicated space for online learners and mentors.
- Make mentoring a full-time assignment when the number of online students warrant.
- Know what you want from the program.
- Have a plan for the future, but be prepared to develop and adapt as you go.
- Establish ground rules for the program and include them in a student and parent contract.
- Assure the IT team are prepared to provide the kind of support mentors and online students require.

"Deadlines and structure are not built into some courses. In order to ensure success, supports for timely completion must be provided by another means: the mentor."

"You can't beat a successful interaction between a teacher and a student. Online classes are not a place to put kids just because they can't succeed anywhere else. If they can't pass their Spanish class in a classroom with a teacher, this isn't a great choice. You have to ask, 'Why are we putting this student in an online class?'"

MENTOR ADVICE TO ONLINE INSTRUCTORS

“Let the students know you’re a real person. Provide as much contact information as possible, where you went to college, what you enjoy doing in your spare time, why you teach the class.”

It is clear from the individual case studies that the mentors interviewed typically engage with the students on an academic and social level. Although they may assist the student in seeking additional academic support, they do not see it as their role to help students master academic content. They do see guiding students in improving existing learning skills and developing those they may be lacking as an important responsibility. Working together, mentors and online instructors assist students in becoming more independent learners and better communicators while they master academic content.

When asked “What advice do you have for the online instructors?” the mentors offered feedback in four areas:

1. **Focus on communication.**
2. **Build relationships.**
3. **Understand student perception.**
4. **Consider course procedures.**

Focus on communication

- Respond to students within the timeframe promised; students feel they are not important when they have to wait 72 hours.
- Respond as soon as possible to the mentor when he/she reaches out about challenges a student is having.
- Consider sending weekly email to mentors.
- Connect with parents/guardians.
- Urge the student to get started on the course activities right away and encourage them continuously to keep them going.
- Be aware of a student’s IEP, and investigate how to accommodate any special needs before the semester starts.
- Inform the mentor directly of any problems the student is having; mentors appreciate the instructors reaching out because of a concern.

“I really appreciate it when the teacher reaches out because he or she has a concern.”



Build relationships

- Communicate with the mentor.
- Provide as much one-on-one attention as you would if the student was in your classroom.
- Be aware of whether the mentor is full-time or part-time; they may have other responsibilities or may not be present every day.
- Work on solutions to student issues with the mentor.
- Work on students' learning goals with the mentor.

"Students seem to want – need – feedback even more quickly than in the classroom. There's safety in knowing you can get an answer to your question right away."

Understand student perception

- Be open to students' ideas; it makes them feel valued and respected.
- Provide the option to use Skype, FaceTime, or Adobe Connect regularly. It makes a big difference when the student has the opportunity to Skype with a teacher. It makes them "real."
- Respond to students as soon as possible; they feel disconnected and unimportant if they have to wait too long.

"When students feel the teacher isn't approachable, they think they don't have to do the work. Sometimes the students interpret instructor comments as if they're being yelled at or punished. They don't like that. I say, 'Maybe they're being nice, and you just can't hear them.' I try to help the student interpret the comments from the teacher's point of view."

Consider course procedures

- Provide sufficient structure within the course that the student must work daily.
- Establish quarterly deadlines to make it easier for the student to stay on pace and the mentor to motivate the student when necessary.
- Enforce consequences for missing deadlines.
- Provide as much information to the students as you would if they were in the classroom.
- Give passwords to the mentors ahead of time.
- Identify students by first and last name in any communication.

"Online learning is more individualized than any other classroom setting. Students are setting their pace and working when they are ready. Online teachers should capitalize on helping their students master course material or course objectives. For example, in an online setting there is no pressure for teachers to make sure they are starting Unit 2 next week. Instructors can create an environment that is very student friendly that drives individual success and growth."



MENTOR ADVICE TO PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

“Parents have to treat an online class with the same respect they give a class that has a teacher in front of the students. Online courses count toward the student’s grade point so parents need to act like they’re as important as face-to-face classes, and they need to talk with the mentor and instructor when they have questions or concerns.”

Parents and guardians are very important to student success. All the mentors in this study interact with parents – from deciding whether the student is ready or well suited for online learning to discussing pacing problems and celebrating achievements. They use email and the phone and face-to-face meetings to build relationships that will support the student.

The question “What advice do you have for parents?” elicited responses in three areas:

- 1. Participate in your student’s online learning experience.**
- 2. Recognize the profile of successful online learners.**
- 3. Understand the difference between online and traditional, face-to-face courses.**

Participate in your student’s online learning experience

- Attend the school’s open house or orientation program.
- Check the course pacing guides to see if your student is keeping up with course assignments and deadlines.
- Help students stay engaged in course assignments; contact the mentor for specific support for your student.
- Read carefully guidelines, expectations, and learning contract information your school provides.
- Check the student’s progress using your own login information.
- Contact the mentor when you have questions and concerns.
- Ask the student to show you his or her grades.

“Parent support makes mentoring easier when kids are struggling.”



Recognize the profile of successful online learners

- Can your student work independently?
- Does your student log into the course often?
- Does your student work consistently?
- Can your student take responsibility for his or her own learning?
- Can your student write clearly to express his or her concerns and ask questions?
- Will your student follow up with teachers if he or she has a question or a problem?

"In an online learning environment, students have more control over their learning, but with this learning opportunity they have a greater responsibility. They have to be self-motivated and self-disciplined, and they have to be their own advocate to be successful. There is no one next to them to ask the question they need answered that in a traditional setting they might never ask."

Understand the differences and similarities between online and traditional, face-to-face courses

- Understand how the class works.
- Understand how grades affect eligibility, GPA, and graduation.
- Be aware of the opportunities and options available to students online.
- Be aware that online courses are rigorous and are just as difficult if not more challenging than traditional classes.
- Understand that communication and pacing are critical to success.
- Know that grades aren't always available as promptly as in face-to-face classes.
- Recognize that to ensure success in online courses, students and parents may have additional responsibilities.

"Online learning provides students with a learning experience that can meet the needs of each individual student by allowing them control over time and place. It provides students and parents a good indicator of whether or not an individual student is truly college ready."

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