

NET WORKING

Program links at-risk teens to mentors through Internet

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During his 12 years as a teacher in the Brighton school district, Paul Fortier saw kids who used drugs and alcohol, and some who were violent or sexually active at an early age.

Nowadays, Fortier devotes his full-time efforts to trying to reach those same type of "at-risk" teens through an Internet-based mentoring program. His goal is to encourage change by having the teens de-

velop positive relationships with selected adults through the Internet.

Fortier said studies show that teens who feel connected to a significant adult are less apt to develop "at-risk" behavior.

"I would work with a kid all day at school and see so much potential," Fortier said. "But the next day, the kid was a different person. There was no one at home for this kid."

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MENTORING: Adults answer teens' questions with the help of e-mail

InSite is a collaborative project supported by Project Education of Ann Arbor Public Schools.

The project uses computers and the Internet to match young people with adult partners and generate communication around life issues.

It will be offered to all Washtenaw County schools, and, if successful, it will branch out to surrounding counties.

The mentoring project has received more than \$27,000 in equipment and support. The program is supported by grants from the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation, Washtenaw Council for the Arts and the Michigan Association for Computer-related technology Users in Learning. The Huron Valley Committee Network has also donated Web space to the project.

Once an adult decides to become an online mentor, that person will be required to go through a screening process and background check. A teen from the Ann Arbor Public Schools Project Education will interview the prospective mentor and create a Web page for the person.

A mentor's duty is to answer inquiries by e-mail from a variety of students. Topics can range from careers to life direction.

The project began four months ago in Livingston County. A group of "at-risk" students were in charge of screening and creating Web pages for the 25 mentors currently in the program.

"It is an excellent opportunity for troubled youth to get involved with something they are interested in," mentor Colin MacGregor said. "It's

really about showing these kids that there is someone that cares about them."

The effort is trying to get a variety of mentors from every background.

If a mentor and a student develop a relationship, a request can be made to become an online partner. Being a partner means communicating only with one student.

The final step to mentoring is face to face. This is where the mentor and student meet and carry on the relationship. Both parties take the initiative of making this happen.

"This is a lot like Big Brothers and Big Sisters," Fortier said. "Except the Internet brings the two together by interest."

Fortier is aware that adults live busy lives and many are wary of the responsibility that goes along with helping a troubled teen. But

through the Internet, names are kept anonymous and responsibility is a minimum.

The program does require a person who chooses to become a mentor to check his or her e-mail twice a week.

"It gives the busy person a chance to help out," Fortier said. "Almost everyone has access to e-mail. Spending a half hour on line would help out a lot."

The mentor database is expected to be filled by January 1999. "Then we will be able to offer the program to public schools," Fortier said.

Fortier hopes the program will be used as an alternative means of addressing "at-risk" behavior by teens, rather than punishment.

The program is looking for adults at least 20 years old to be mentors. They can reach Paul Fortier at (734) 995-8853 or e-mail him at pfash@umich.edu

To find out more, go to <http://www.hvcn.org/info/insite>

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