

PASS AmeriCorps Mentors Build Deep Connection with Students



Having a trusted adult in their life to provide guidance and support can make a big difference for a student.

Teachers, counselors, and school staff often fill that role, but for some students, PASS AmeriCorps mentors connect with them in a way that others can't.

"We get to be that person to them, that they can go to with anything," said **Alexandra Penrod**, recruitment and capacity-building member. "We're that bridge between the things they know they can do but they might not want to do, like homework and schoolwork. And we try to give them a reason to care about and think about their future and prepare them for the things that could be coming in life."

During COVID-19, mentors have shifted to providing support to students online, while also helping out with food distribution efforts, monitoring students for masks at schools open for in-person learning, and volunteering at vaccination sites.

When students are learning in-person, PASS mentors are typically on campus full-time every day, allowing for a level of access unmatched by other mentoring programs. Mentors also receive support and training from SDCOE's experts.

"It makes our program unique," said Project Specialist **Tessa Diederich**.

The PASS AmeriCorps program — Promoting Achievement and Student Success — collaborates with schools to focus on improving academics, behavior, and attendance through character development, academic support, and opportunities for positive school and community engagement. The program started more than 20 years ago as an effort to help students impacted by gangs, but has since expanded to also include other groups of students.

Diederich said that mentors really "meet the students where they are" whether they are struggling with coping mechanisms, aggression, social skills, or other areas, and select lessons from a variety of different research-based curriculum to get them thinking about their choices.

"My PASS mentor has made a difference in my life, in so many good ways," said one high school student. "Mr. Gabriel helps me with my school work when I am struggling, and he doesn't let me give up. He is an adult that I trust and look up to."

PASS AmeriCorps mentors are typically recent college graduates who want to work with students but are unsure of which career path to take. Many are considering teaching, counseling, or social work. The program provides the opportunity to work at a school, get a feel for what those positions look like, and decide which avenue they want to pursue.

All PASS leadership team members were also mentors, a requirement of the position at SDCOE.

Both Diederich and Penrod became mentors because they wanted to work with students but weren't sure in what capacity. Diederich got her teaching credential after working at a middle school but transitioned to administration instead of heading to the classroom.

"I want to keep this program going, because I see the benefit for the kids and for the mentors," Diederich said. "Every mentor that comes through our program walks away with important skills. We have mentors who are now teachers and counselors in our districts and in the schools that we are serving. It's nice to see that and we're a step along the way to getting good people out there and getting them in a direction they want to go."