

Student advocates become virtual answer people

Written by Mark Jaeger

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Cost of new NOSD positions being covered by Education Jobs Fund

Northern Ozaukee School District officials concede that one of the greatest challenges of operating a virtual school is the absence of face time between staff, students and parents.

District officials decided to tackle that shortcoming head-on this year by hiring seven student learning advocates, or SLAs, to serve as the ombudsmen between the staff of Wisconsin Virtual Learning and participating families.

The concept is that each family with a student in the virtual school is assigned an SLA, who is the primary source of help whenever issues arise for as long as they are students enrolled in the online charter school.

District materials prepared for prospective students explain the role of the SLA is to “remove any roadblocks” encountered by WVL families.

“The role of the SLA is to be a combination of homeroom teacher, guidance counselor and assistant principal,” according to the district. “Although your student has certified teachers for each subject who are responsible for grading and responding to all student work, the SLA is the person charged with making the school work for your student and your family.”

They work in conjunction with virtual classroom teachers, paraprofessionals and the special-education staff.

Melissa Horn, principal of WVL’s K4-8 program, presented a preliminary assessment of the SLA concept to the School Board last month and had high praise for the strides being made.

On average, she said the SLAs make 10 to 12 calls to virtual school families each day and have at least one contact with each of their assigned families every three weeks.

They monitor attendance and class progress, intervene whenever technical problems arise and keep track of personal situations that can inhibit academic performance.

“The SLA ties everything together. It is their job to see the whole picture ... to know the stories of all their students and their families,” Horn said.

She said there was some trepidation by staff when the SLA concept was adopted this school year, but those fears were quickly allayed.

“On the first day of classes, when I walked into the SLA room and saw they were all on the phone with parents, I knew we were going to be OK,” Horn said.

Two SLAs, Peggy Brown and Abbey Bryant, talked about cases where the personal attention they have been able to give individual students is already paying off.

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Brown said she has been working with a junior who lives with her grandparents and had been rebelling against the constraints of conventional schools.

When she started, she was failing all of her classes, but after regular contact with her SLA, the girl showed marked improvement.

“She is now passing half of her classes and is excited about school,” Brown said.

Bryant shared a similar story of an academic turn-around involving a senior girl.

“It comes down to building connections,” she said.

The role of the SLA is especially important in the virtual school because of the large class loads for which each teacher is responsible.

With 4.5 teachers, the elementary program has a student/teacher ratio of 76-to-1. The middle school has six teachers and a student/teacher ratio of 32-to-1.

The \$235,358 needed for the SLA positions this year is coming from the federal Education Jobs Fund. The \$10 billion stimulus program allocated \$180 million to the State of Wisconsin for new education hirings.