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Mentoring program gives kids incentive to learn

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When Chris Balme was a middle school teacher, his students asked the same two questions again and again: “Is this going to be on a test?” and “Why do we need to know this?”

He realized that without a good reason to learn, students were often bored and unmotivated, and then too many quit. With the state’s high school dropout rate at a mind-boggling 25 percent, Balme decided to start asking his students questions: “If you could be anything when you grow up, what would you be? What’s your dream job?”

Balme took the students’ answers - everything from astronaut to zoologist - and five years ago started Spark, a Bay Area nonprofit middle school apprenticeship program with a mission to give children a reason for - and renewed joy in - the act of dividing a rational number or learning the life cycle of a frog.

“Our whole idea is that schools need more relevance,” said Balme, who co-founded the program with Melia Dicker, also a former teacher.

Spark staffers, based in San Francisco, go to after-school programs or middle schools throughout the year to talk to students. Any student who is interested, with parental permission, is then matched with a carefully screened mentor. The nonprofit program is funded by foundations and individual donors, and apprenticeships are offered in the fall and spring semesters as well as the summer.

Since 2004, 425 students - mostly at-risk students struggling academically or socially at school - have completed the program. In the fall semester, 62 students are participating in a wide range of apprenticeships in San Francisco and Redwood City - their passions connected as closely as possible by Spark’s placement team to their schoolwork.

For Spark seventh-grader Yamileth Alfaro, that connection came in the form of a chocolate mocha cake with a butter crumble top.

The San Francisco apprentice baker pulled the cake out of the oven at Mama’s on Washington Square and closely examined the buttery brown top and rolling texture of the crumble with her mentor, Felicia Sanchez.

Culinary necessity



Yamileth Alfaro, 12, prepares a mocha cake with mentor Felicia Sanchez, owner of the Mama’s on Washington Square bakery.
Photo: Jana Asenbrennerova / The Chronicle



Audrey Doyle, 13, works on animation at Biocreep Studio in San Francisco as part of the program.
Photo: Jana Asenbrennerova / The Chronicle

The math and chemistry involved in making the cake went from academic drudgery to culinary necessity. And it had the added benefit of tasting good.

Yamileth, who attends San Francisco's Denman Middle School, meets with Sanchez at Mama's for two hours every Monday after school where they test out a new recipe, make jam for the next day's cafe customers and talk about what it takes to be a professional chef. Their pumpkin cupcakes flew off the shelves the previous week, and Sanchez had high hopes for the mocha cake - which Yamileth taste-tested and declared as, "Wow. Good!"

"Every week I can totally see her getting better," said Sanchez, whose family opened the cafe in 1951. School useful after all

With real-life experience, students like Yamileth can see that school doesn't seem so useless. That's something they need to realize in middle school, before they fall too far behind or give up, something more likely to happen in high school, Balme said.

In Spark, "the students realize math is actually used. It's not just a torture device," he said. "As soon as they see that, they're willing to invest time in" school.

When Balme asks his dream job questions, he still gets a fair number of students who say they want to be an astronaut, a veterinarian or a professional athlete. But these days, the answer the middle school students give is as likely to be chef, politician, animator or crime scene investigator.

Thank the "CSI" television series for that last one, and cooking channels for the first.

"It's a total barometer of where we are now and where we'll expand in that part of the economy," he said.

Currently, the most frequently requested profession is in computers and technology, but students have previously requested apprenticeships with morticians, comic book artists and even a retirement planner.

Spark's staff screens the mentors carefully, interviewing them and putting them through state and federal background checks.

Then they train them, helping them remember what it's like to be an adolescent and understand the program's ground rules.

The apprentices "can't fetch coffee and they can't photocopy things," Balme said.

The program is "forcing students to come face-to-face with adult responsibilities and the endless possibilities out there for them," said Jessica Ekstrom, director of youth development at the Beacon Center at Denman Middle School, where about eight students are Spark apprentices this fall. "We've definitely seen just a great impact from the program and wish we could get all our students doing it."

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