

# STEPPING IN, STEPPING UP: INTERNSHIPS AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES ELEVATE STUDENTS' LEARNING

Beaver Area, Hempfield Area, and Quaker Valley

Mia Haywiser helps to manage a program that supports the technology needs of more than 2,000 people in suburban Pittsburgh.

Sitting in a Zoom call as Haywiser and her colleague, Olivia Tabone, explain how their program works, it's easy to forget that they're high school students — and that being part of the Student Technology Assistance Program (STAP) is just one part of their lives in the Beaver Area School District.

The program started more than a decade ago with a handful of students helping their teacher. Today, more than 80 students participate each year. And it's led and administered by students themselves, says Beaver Area's director of technology, James Shay.

The program has been so successful that Beaver Area students sometimes make presentations to other school districts, many of which are considering creating their own version of STAP.

In an increasingly tech-centric era, STAP is one of many innovative tools that school districts in Western Pennsylvania are using to provide real-world work experiences and help students find the career paths that will serve them best. Districts like Beaver Area, Hempfield Area, and Quaker Valley are thinking deeply about how to prepare students to thrive amid a rapidly changing employment landscape.

And they're not doing so alone. These districts are part of Future-Driven Schools, an alliance of 47 school districts working to share ideas and encourage innovation, helping teachers, administrators, and board members do what they

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do best: innovate and collaborate in ways that benefit students.

## Hempfield Area: "It truly does take a village"

The Hempfield Area School District embraces the power of partnership to create powerful opportunities for its students. In our fast-evolving world, "it truly does take a village nowadays," says Hempfield Area's deputy superintendent, Emily Sanders. "We need to work smarter and work together."

To that end, the district works with a long and growing list of partners: Westmoreland County Community College, Seton Hill University, Saint Vincent College, the Central Westmoreland Career and Technology Center, and even the Pittsburgh-based Attack Theatre. The partnerships form a multi-pronged approach to giving high school students apprenticeship training and the chance to earn college credits.

In one program, students are taking concrete steps toward professional careers in education before they've graduated high school. Teens who are interested in education are paired with elementary school teachers who are excited to serve as mentors — and who also appreciate having a second pair of helping hands in their classrooms.

But that's just the beginning. The internship program is growing throughout the district's buildings, with high schoolers taking on many of the jobs that help keep a school district running. Students interested in the financial field, for example, are getting a chance to work in the district's business office, while other interns learn about sports medicine from a physical therapist, or about media relations in the district's communications office.

This program has been especially valuable for teens who are on the verge of spending a great deal of money on a university degree in a field they assume — or perhaps hope — they'll enjoy.

By participating in these internships, Sanders says, "they can tell before they leave here if this field is for them. These are real-life experiences we can give to our kids."

And happily, she says, unexpected benefits have emerged. Along with helping students gain experience, these interactions also give people in the district's business and maintenance offices the rare chance to connect with students.

"It's great," Sanders says. "Now, we are just looking for ways to scale that up for the future."

## Quaker Valley: Students "find their way"

At Quaker Valley High School, what started as a student-led tech initiative similar to STAP has grown into a wide-ranging program that uses the district's resources, the community's expertise, and students' individual interests to help each Quaker Valley teen "find their way," says Amy Keller, the district's career education coordinator.



Students are challenged to explore their skills, their personal interests, and how these elements might fit into the world after graduation, Keller says. They also learn about the different kinds of skills that are currently in demand — or likely to be in demand in the future — throughout the workforce.

But the process goes beyond the valuable hours spent thinking about and discussing students' futures. Quaker Valley students are also required to find and pursue an experiential learning project to build skills that are tailored to their individual interests and goals.

There is plenty of room for creativity: Kids aren't pigeonholed into one specific kind of project. They're encouraged to tailor their ideas to their own interests and strengths, which allows every student to be able to find a degree of success with their independent project.

"We also really encourage students to step outside of our school and into our larger community," Keller says. "We have internships with our local arts center. We have internships with our local YMCA. We have internships with our community center. And then we also try to branch students beyond that into the Pittsburgh area at large."

A Quaker Valley student who was interested in engineering and construction, for example, participated in a nationally organized program. Through that program, the student got inspired to build a "tiny house" in his parents' backyard. Today, it's a beautiful "she shed" used by his mother.

No matter what kind of internship or project a student chooses, the recurring theme for students and staff at Quaker Valley is to be purpose-driven, says the district's communications director, Michelle Dietz.

"I feel like the word that we keep saying over and over and over is 'intention,'" Dietz says. "We're intentional and being thoughtful about why we're doing what we're doing, and how we're making those things valuable and sustainable."

## Beaver Area: "The students raise each other"

The STAP program has become central to keeping the Beaver Area School District running smoothly. Along the way, trust has played a big role in its success and its growth.

The students do have some access to sensitive information about each other. They also play a role in evaluating each other's work, and they're trusted with making decisions as part of a leadership team. This has led to a culture of hard work and noticeable pride in doing their jobs professionally.

The experience brings several benefits: Serving as part of the STAP team improves their tech skills and gives them impressive work experience to include on a college application or resume. It's a great conversation starter during an interview.

At the same time, the work teaches them project management, problem solving, and communication skills. They operate alongside district staff as colleagues, learning how to function professionally while having a meaningful role in developing policies and best practices that are now shared with other school districts.

The students work in teams, grouped by their areas of expertise and their particular administrative duties. Older, more experienced students put time and effort into mentoring younger members of the STAP staff.

As Haywiser puts it, "The students raise each other."

It's difficult work, and students still have to find time for their classes and assignments. But the experience is so positive that there are now more applicants than job openings on the STAP team. As the project has grown, the district has

collaborated with students to create a fair and rigorous hiring process.

Among the valuable career lessons that these teens are already learning: how to share and receive bad news.

Not every student makes the jump from being "minions" (as the program's middle school students are called) to the leadership team at the high school level. And when students evaluate one another's work, sometimes it requires a kind but clear conversation about areas that need improvement.

But even on the challenging days, being part of STAP is deeply rewarding, Haywiser says. She enjoys helping others with their tech challenges, and she's delighted when she can teach her teachers about technology.

When something "clicks" and a teacher says, "Oh, I understand this now," it's a truly cool experience, she says.

