Lending a Hand & Making (Educational) Connections
Carmel High School students have a long history of helping younger students as classroom volunteers through the Students Assisting Students (SAS) Club. This year, after a two-year hiatus, the program is back and students are reaping the benefits.

The club pairs high school juniors and seniors who apply to the program with elementary school teachers to volunteer their time in the classroom. In the process, the high school students gain mentors and hands-on classroom experience.

“We want the high school students to have that hands-on experience in the classroom, and it’s also a nice way for them to give back to the community,” said Carmel High School Teaching Assistant Isabel Pompa, who is club advisor.

More than 30 high school students and 25 teachers are participating this year. Students must submit an application and teacher recommendations to be considered for the program.

Juniors Jimmy Lyons and Kate Dalton both said the program allowed them to see what it would be like to teach elementary school. Both are volunteering in second-grade classrooms. Lyons was inspired by his mother, who is a teacher.

“I liked how kids were always happy when they were with her, and I just wanted to repeat that and give my kindness to students,” he said.

The experience has shown the high schoolers a different side of teaching as a career.

“When I first thought about teaching elementary school, I was mainly thinking about spending time with the students, but obviously you have to learn the curriculum and be able teach them,” said Dalton.

“I like coaching kids and giving them a new perspective and helping them learn new things,” said Lyons, who also volunteers as a lacrosse coach. “I wanted to see a different view of teaching younger kids.”

Both students have had the opportunity to assist the teachers and students in a variety of ways in the classroom.

“I like the hands-on activities and working with the students because I find that to be a new challenge,” said Dalton. “Trying to teach addition and subtraction to students is something I have enjoyed and have been getting better at doing.”

“It’s a lot more rewarding seeing a student understand something that you gave them the tools to grasp,” said Lyons.
Kent Elementary School teacher Jennifer Vishinski has been both student and teacher in the program.

“The SAS experience is what helped me decide that I wanted to be a second-grade teacher, and here I am 28 years later, living my dream,” said Vishinski.

Like most teachers who mentor in the program, Vishinski has hosted several SAS students over the years, many of whom are her former students. Some even came back after graduation to complete fieldwork or student teaching with her during their journeys to become teachers.

“I think it’s important to have a place for those people coming up in teaching to learn and practice and maybe become employees of our district one day.”

Not only are the high school students making meaningful connections with their teacher mentors, but with the elementary students too. Their presence in the classroom resembles that of a celebrity to their younger peers. In fact, Dalton is so popular with the younger students that when she rides the bus home in the afternoon with them, they all vie to sit with her. She now keeps a list of names to ensure she rotates her seat sharing, to be fair.

High school students in the program come with a wide variety of interests. Students can find placement in English as a New Language (ENL), occupational therapy and dedicated subject areas such as music or reading.

“Previously, students were placed in grade K-4 classes but then I began receiving inquiries requesting students in music, art, physical education, occupational therapy and more,” said Pompa. “I thought it would be a great way to expand the program by providing those placement opportunities to students who might be interested in those areas.”

Senior Gabriella Luppino is planning to study speech pathology after graduation. When the opportunity to apply for the program became available, she saw a pathway to gain relevant experience before college. Gabriella was paired with Kent Primary School ENL teacher Angeline Solimine.

"ENL goes hand in hand with speech pathology because most of these students don’t know much English, so teaching them sounds and words goes along with speech,” said Luppino.

“I like helping the students write. They get so excited when they can tell what the words are, and that part is so great to see. I also love reading to them and working on their sight words.”

Solimine is always happy to have students work alongside her.

“Having a student volunteer like Gabriella is nice for me because I often have several students who are learning English all at different levels,” she said. “Having her here allows us to be one-on-one at times. It is so nice to have an extra set of hands. I wish I could have her all day.”

Even for students who are unsure of their career interests or thinking of a completely different career path than teaching, the program provides opportunities to explore options and make meaningful connections.
“I don’t really know what I want to do for a career yet. I have been interested in teaching, but I don’t really know,” said senior Samantha Duffy, who is volunteering in a second-grade classroom at Kent Elementary School. “It’s still just a really good experience because I think I want to work with kids.”

Senior Nick Rosaforte plans to study homeland security and cyber security but applied to be part of the SAS program as a former student of his mentor, Matthew Paterson Elementary teacher Christine Demme.

“It’s been so interesting to see that the way the students learn today is the same way I learned,” he said, recalling his fond memories with Demme.

“Carmel High School provides a lot of good opportunities for its students, especially those thinking of studying education,” said Matthew Paterson Elementary teacher Charissa Vickery who is hosting two SAS students this year. “The emphasis on community service and helping in your community is important. It is also nice when you know the SAS students and they are former students that come back.”

Recently, several former SAS students have returned to the district as substitute teachers and remain in contact with Pompa.

“It’s always nice to connect with them,” she said. “They have been able to share with me their experiences as SAS students and how it helped them decide to become educators.”

SAS students will, once again, be a staple in the elementary classrooms throughout the district through the end of the school year – making connections and making a difference.

Permalink:
https://www.carmelschools.org/groups/82379/carmel_high_school_news/lending_a_hand__making_educational_connections