Proposal for an Academic Mentoring Program at Rivendell Academy

The NEED:
- Failing students often struggle to succeed in multiple classes.
- Increase in the number of students who need support during the school day to get work done inside and outside of class. These students need to develop the habits to complete work when they have the time.
- Increase in the number of students exhibiting social/emotional difficulties; some of these students do not qualify for special education.
- Students lack the student skills or executive functioning skills that lead to success in school, especially as they plan and carryout longer range assignments and projects.
- Increase in the number of students with 504 plans.
- Students without identified disabilities struggling to pass classes.

One SOLUTION = ACADEMIC MENTORING

Academic mentoring is a program that matches students with a teacher/tutor/mentor who works with that student to increase his/her academic performance by developing a close connection with the student. It is a combination of tutoring and mentoring simultaneously. The program recognizes that a student cannot learn algebra if other factors (homelessness, anxiety/depression, difficulties at home...) weigh on them more heavily than school. The premise is that once students have a chance to talk over an issue, feel listened to and cared about, they are ready to tackle solving a system of equations, to write a persuasive essay, or study for a biology test. The program provides the motivational and organizational support, as well as interpersonal skills (asking for help, seeking help outside of class.) for students to succeed in school and later in life. Mentors can work with students to organize other opportunities such as a Choose Your Own Adventure Day, Governor's Institute, volunteering, or having an outside mentor.

An academic mentoring program can alleviate the number of students referred to special education because they are getting the interventions they need through the program. It targets students with chronic failure issues who are not in special education.

NUTS and BOLTS of an AM PROGRAM for RIVENDELL ACADEMY

Staffing
- One teacher and one paraprofessional
- Meet with 3-4 students every block of the day (no prep needed because teacher is not prepping for classes to teach; instead she responds to the needs of the students in the moment)
During a block students will work on student skills, coping strategies and receive tutoring and homework help
Teacher will be the liaison between parent and school
While para has lunch break teacher is with students
While teacher has lunch and is at grade level team meetings (different grade each day) para is with students
If teacher has to manage a student in crisis, para works with others
Teacher could be 504 coordinator (need to look at numbers and needs)
Use UVEI interns as full-time tutor/mentors for a semester

Student targeted for the program
- Is usually unproductive in class (leaving work incomplete), doesn’t focus when given time to complete work during or after school.
- Is not succeeding in school because of outside circumstances working against him/her
- Has a definite potential to succeed in school
- Needs mentoring support before being open to academic support
- Often has attendance issues
- Has trouble advocating for him/herself
- Was already flagged in middle school

Space—back 1/3 of the library
- Remove bookshelves along the floor, but use a few to delineate the space from the rest of the library
- 2 round tables—one for teacher with students; one or para with students
- 1-2 carousel type desk space for student who needs to work alone
- 1 desk for teacher
- 1 small file cabinet
- Block-like shelves along back wall for student cubbies to keep needed work/supplies

See attached for other documents from my time in Bennington that spell out the academic mentoring program I started and ran there.
IMPACT/OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION

The Grantee shall offer at-risk students an adult who is a safe, competent person who will give any necessary academic support, as well as advocate for that student to receive any further opportunities necessary to be successful in school. The ultimate goal is for more and more students to complete their high school education and transition successfully to post-secondary education or into the workforce.

Program Objectives: The Academic Mentor Program provides an academic mentor to students who are experiencing academic difficulties. This program combines mentoring with tutoring during school hours. Mentors assist students with academic subjects, help them navigate the complexity of classroom work and expectations, but also attend to other student needs that interfere with learning. The ultimate objectives are:

- Increase the number of students who are earning school credit
- Increase the number of students who complete high school
- Increase the attendance of students
- Increase the number of students who go on to post-secondary education and employment

Performance Measures:

- Identified at-risk students will:
  - Pass more academic classes, earning required credits
  - Increase their grade point averages
  - Earn a high school diploma
  - Have a post-secondary plan of education and/or employment

Project / Program Design and Implementation:

Academic tutor / mentors combine mentoring with tutoring before, after, or during school hours. Located in the school library, students pass through to ask for assistance or spend part of all of a class period working with a tutor. Mentors help students with academic subjects they are struggling in, but also attend to other student needs that interfere with learning. This may involve helping students get necessary supports for a social problem (pregnancy, substance use, peer relationship issues, family issues, etc.) or may be something less complex like helping a student learn to negotiate with a teacher and look at what he/she wants for their futures. For some students, meeting with a mentor in the library is a safe alternative to making a “wrong choice” in a heated moment.

Within the Academic Mentoring Program, students will find various levels of help from their mentors. The philosophy is “whatever it takes.” Some students leave class regularly to work with a mentor. Others check in periodically for help with a paper. For some students, mentoring offers a short term boost during a difficult time.
The school principal reviews every student’s need before they are placed into the program.

Once a student is placed in the program, the coordinator of the program takes over, placing the student with herself or another tutor – mentor. Data is collected on each student who is in the program on a quarterly basis, with a final report completed at the end of each school year. Data gathered includes class grades, attendance, discipline referrals, and ultimately graduation and post-graduation information.

**What is Academic Mentoring? (at MAUHS)**

Academic mentoring is a program that matches students with a tutor who works with that student to increase his/her academic performance by developing a close connection with the student. It is a combination of tutoring and mentoring simultaneously. Our program recognizes that a student cannot learn algebra if other factors weigh on them more heavily than school. We have found that once students have a chance to talk over an issue, feel listened to and cared about, they are ready to tackle solving a system of equations, to write a persuasive essay, or study for a biology test.

The types of students in the program are as varied as the overall population of MAUHS. The group is split down the middle in terms of males and females. They range from first semester freshman to last semester seniors. Some have a lengthy discipline history; others have none. Some have perfect attendance; others have trouble getting to school. They arrive with a different number of learning styles, different abilities to focus, and different needs. The overreaching similarity between all of our students is that they are struggling to succeed in at least one of their academic classes. Most of them are challenged with issues other than their academics, as well.

Given the diversity in our student population, the program itself is multifaceted. Some of the time students meet with their tutor one-on-one, though more often there will be 2-3, sometimes 5-7, students with each mentor. Occasionally, a tutor might spend time in the classroom helping others along with his/her mentee. Meeting times range from 45 to 90 minutes. Some students are seen every day, while others meet every other day or even once a week. Students may be pulled out of a class or they may have a block scheduled with the tutor to support other classes. In some cases, the focus is just one class. Other times, students need assistance in organizational and study skills, and we may support their efforts in all classes. In addition to helping students with classes in which they are currently enrolled, our tutors may work with a student who failed a class, but who can earn back the credit by doing a set number of hours of tutoring and passing the final exam.
One of the greatest assets of this program is the connection made with each student. The tutors are individuals who care deeply about the education of our students. They are able to connect with the kids in a way that makes them effective tutors and mentors. Many of our students lack a positive adult connection at school or even outside of school. These connections are a key to our success. Another invaluable aspect of the program is its flexibility. It is tailored to each student's specific needs. (Give examples here---) Tutors soon become advocates for their students. This advocating takes many forms: sometimes the tutors help students talk with teachers to fully understand an assignment, or make accommodations when it is not working in the classroom. Since many times the tutors are a student’s confidant on certain personal issues, the tutors will also let teachers know if circumstances outside the classroom have changed in a way that will impact that student’s performance. Tutors work with students to let guidance counselors, school-based clinicians, and administrators know what is going on in their life that impacts school. Once the students are able to have these conversations with a tutor at their side, many are later able to advocate for themselves without the mentor being there.

For many of our students the Academic Mentoring Program becomes a second family to them. They look at the mentors as another set of parents, the other mentees as siblings, and the space as their home away from home. SEE KATIE’s SPEECH...One of the unspoken parts of the program is that we are teaching tolerance to our students. Everyone is accepted in our space, and the students readily feel that acceptance. Very quickly they learn to accept others no matter how different they are and no matter what their past history with the others.

One of the challenges in developing the program was in building the faculty’s trust in what we were doing with students. We had to prove that taking them out of class, giving them so much attention, making accommodations that didn’t fit any traditional IEPs or 504s was going to benefit everyone and not “enable” these “bad” kids more than they were already manipulating the system. Keeping the lines of communication wide open between mentors and teachers has made the biggest difference in developing this trust. In addition, for the past two years we have had one subject-specific faculty member each semester who works in the program in place of teaching a short block class. For example, this semester we have a chemistry teacher working with us because a significant number of our students are taking chemistry. Using teachers in this way has helped more teachers understand what we do. Furthermore, it has given students an opportunity to connect with classroom teachers on a different level. (everyone we work with the make the program work)

Another challenge we face with the program is having the capacity to meet the needs of so many kids. As the numbers rise, we are not able to give students as
much one-on-one attention. It is not easy to maintain the right balance in terms of overall kids enrolled as well as the number of kids at one table at any given time. Adding more kids encourages them to help each other, leads to the more open-mindedness of many, and forces kids to become self-reliant. However, there is a varying critical number that gets to be too many and going over can lead to frustration for everyone if needs are not being met. Another balancing act involves admission into the program. It can be a challenge to make sure the program is not overused or used incorrectly. Once the program took off, it was seen as a solution for every student’s issues. Recently we pulled together a list of qualities of our “typical” students and suggestions for guidance counselors to try before thinking we are the answer.

(Move to below bulleted section)

As the program grew from one tutor and a few students to 4-5 tutors and nearly 100 students, we had to look at space as an issue. The first tutor met with her students in the library. When the second tutor was hired she started meeting with students in the student center which is a separate building just behind the main school building.

### Academic Mentoring Typical Kid/Criteria for Program

**Our Typical Kid:**
- Is not succeeding in school because of outside circumstances working against him/her
- Has a definite potential to succeed in school
- Needs mentoring support before being open to academic support
- Often has attendance issues
- Has trouble advocating for him/herself
- Was already flagged in middle school—ends up in freshman forum
- Is usually unproductive in class, doesn't do homework outside of school

**Things to look at/try before asking for a Tutor/Mentor**
- Find out the dynamics in the classroom. Is this a tough group of kids? What's the teacher like?
- How has the teacher tried to connect with the student as an INDIVIDUAL?
- Have the parents been contacted?
- What has the student done for him/herself (especially if this is a request from a student)
Staffing and funding for the program—The director of the program is a certified teacher with many years of teaching experience. The other three tutors are young, educated people, often just out of college, many of whom are aspiring to become teachers. Some have gone back to school part-time, others are looking to learn more before they have their own classrooms. One of last year’s tutors is now a full time English teacher at MAU. All of the tutors are salaried employees, but they are not on the teachers’ contract. They make less than $20,000 a year, but receive health insurance and other teacher benefits.

STORIES TO TELL

- SP who wouldn’t go to a meeting about herself because “no one would listen to her anyway.” Sue and I met with her prior to the “big” meeting. She went….was listened to…..
- CWB sketch book for art
- ZB showing up with nothing to prep for test, next time had lots of material and “already knew half the stuff” aced the test....
- AC “now that I actually pay attention in class and do my work, I don’t know how I ever failed”
- MC after being told if he missed a day of class and he had to behave or he REALLY would NOT graduate—he started doing all he needed to do and said to his mentor, “Why didn’t I do this from the beginning? It’s much easier.”
- IB and Gretchen not giving up on him
- JA going from being tutored to tutoring others