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coordinators in the past five years, and only two volunteer mentors from last year came back for the 2016-17 school year.

“There was not consistency from year to year because this job kept turning over and someone kept coming in and having to figure out how to do it,” he said.

Enough volunteers for all students

Bisek’s first task is expanding the number of volunteers so ideally students can start setting their first mentorship meeting as early as sophomore year, and then meet consistently throughout their junior and senior years.

“That way they’re well ahead of schedule and already having that conversation,” Bisek said. For now, however, “I have almost every senior assigned to a volunteer and I’m ready to start

pairing up juniors, as well.”

The value of having a plethora of volunteers is, primarily, so students can receive mentorship earlier, when they have more power and flexibility to change course or perform better to meet certain goals. The field of options is much wider for freshmen; as they begin senior year, the field narrows, because it’s harder to change a GPA or accumulate extracurricular accolades at that point.

Second, having numerous mentors allows Bisek to be more selective when assigning mentors with students.

“Once you get enough volunteers you can start pairing in ways that appeal to the students’ needs or career interests, and it’s not random,” he said.

Also, if certain pairings don’t go smoothly because of personality differences, they could be adjusted.

“Sometimes you need to tinker a little bit to find a good fit,”

Bisek said. “I would like to be able to have that option, and we’re working toward that.”

Students who already are serviced through Upward Bound — which begins in ninth grade — and Talent Search — which begins in sixth grade — do not get assigned an ASPIRE mentor as it would be redundant.

What mentoring involves

Volunteers meet with one to 10 students at a frequency that is convenient for both parties. That can be weekly or monthly, depending on the students’ goals and motivation, Bisek said.

Mentors develop relationships with the students and discuss their future plans, goals and options.

Bisek has a binder with information for mentors, and they also can find resources, such as useful websites and training tips, online through ASPIRE.

Bisek meets with new volunteer mentors one-on-one to go over material. He also is present during their first meeting with each student, to facilitate the transition.

From there, he is available to do research and help mentors find answers to students’ questions. He meets with mentors from month to month to inform them of what is coming up.

“My primary goal as coordinator is that you don’t feel like you need to do a lot of homework to be a volunteer,” he said. “I want your main focus just to be making that connection with the students.”

Mentors provide a unique presence in a student’s life. They aren’t there to critique grades or demand certain outcomes. Rather, they are meant to encourage a student’s passion and help them realize what is available to them. Some students don’t have those conversations at home; some do, and perhaps tune out their parents,

Bisek said. Teachers may address post-high school plans in class, but they have to stay focused on course curriculum.

But meetings with mentors offer a designated time for students to consider what they want to do next and take steps toward achieving it.

“You’re just taking the reality of their current situation and telling them where they can go with the rest of their life,” Bisek said. “More often than not, it’s far broader than the students believe. Especially being on the coast in a smaller town, they just don’t think they have as many options as they do.”

Additionally, since about 30 to 40 percent of Seaside students don’t pursue higher education, mentors also can introduce them to career options, apprenticeships and vocational training.

No matter what a student’s hopes and dreams are, “we’re here to build them up,” Bisek said.

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