

High school graduation is an exciting milestone. But for some students, it's also fraught with anxiety: What are my goals? Should I go to college or get a job?

It helps to have a reliable mentor—like Kyla McDaniel, a volunteer with the Rush Education and Career Hub's (REACH) MedSTEM Pathways program. McDaniel is one of 20 adult mentors providing individualized one-on-one support to Black and Latinx students from Chicago's West Side.

McDaniel sees herself in the adolescents she mentors. Though she became the first member in her family to graduate college, she struggled in high school.

"I had stage fright, but for life," she said. "[My mentor] helped me see that I deserve this...I wouldn't have gone to college without her."

Now, McDaniel is helping two Chicago high school students pursue careers in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). One of her mentees, Izabella Zuno, has been a REACH participant since fifth grade.

"Kyla has taught me how to hold myself accountable," said Zuno, who plans to be a psychiatrist. "This means setting goals and having aspirations but also making sure I truly put in the work it takes to get there every day."

The REACH program is driven by its mission to increase achievement and diversity in healthcare and STEM professions. The program helps students:

- Set timelines and manage goals;
- Gain confidence and celebrate successes;
- Develop interview skills; and
- Explore pathways to employment.

Since 1990, REACH has supported thousands of students from pre-kindergarten to 12th grade. Many of them have gone on to work at Rush University System for Health.

For McDaniel, the program is mutually beneficial.

"[My mentee] has a persevering spirit that is truly an inspiration for me," she said. "She reminds me that I should shoot for the stars and never give up on my dreams, even when things get tough. She has truly made me a better person."

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