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Giving students real-world experience

A program at Heritage High's magnet school has teens complete internships and job-shadow assignments.

By **CATHY GRIMES** | 247-4758

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NEWPORT NEWS - Tucked into Eric Matthews' fall schedule of high school math, science, English and social studies classes was a block of time devoted to writing and modifying computer program codes. The codes weren't textbook exercises or classroom templates, but real programming instructions used by a data management group where Matthews spent the semester as an intern.

Classmate Shemeka Braswell just started an internship with an architecture firm. She will spend 2 1/2 hours each week working on designs for houses. Brian Brooks also began an internship, using geographic information systems, or GIS, with the Newport News Public Works Department.

All three students are enrolled in Heritage High School's engineering and technology magnet school, which has required internships and job-shadow assignments since 1996. The program is a decade ahead of Newport News Public Schools in its focus on academic and job skills.

Last school year, the district began implementing Career Pathways, a K-12 job exploration and preparation program researched and developed by the U.S. Department of Education. Part of the high school portion of the program is a focus on job shadowing, internships and career readiness.

Dewey Ray, director of Heritage High's 600-student technology magnet program, said all seniors in the program must complete an internship or job-shadowing experience.

"We work with the students to let them understand that while they are in school they can develop skills so that once they are out of high school they can either go directly to work or further their education and build on those skills," Ray said.

The magnet program includes five career strands: engineering, architectural/engineering design, computer science, electronics and networking. Magnet program faculty help match students with internship and job shadow opportunities with companies and agencies in those career fields.

"We tell them, tell the kids like it is, what they can do and how much they can make so they are knowledgeable and understand."

Matthews said his internship fulfilled those expectations.

"I got work done and it got me real job experience," the 17-year-old said. "I learned a couple of new program languages."

The seniors who are involved in internships said they have been treated like professionals.

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"You go in and you're in an office. It's a lot more relaxed than what I thought it would be," said Mathews.

Braswell found herself learning the nuts-and-bolts of building construction, such as how workers put together walls. "We are working on real houses," she said.

Brooks said the sense of working in the real world began during his internship interview, when Newport News Public Works staff posed questions about how he would troubleshoot problems using geographic information systems.

All three students said their internships have helped them understand the relevance of their academic and technical classes.

"It's showing me the programs we have in school are like theirs," Braswell said.

"Government, history and math, it all ties together," said Brooks.

Ray hears such comments often.

"A lot of times the kids say, 'I didn't realize what I was learning in school actually applies,'" he said. "They get the connections."

In addition to exploring career fields and getting hands-on experience, students must prepare a presentation about their internships for their senior seminar class. The presentation is part of the class requirements, and the senior seminar class is required for graduation.

Newport News schools hope to expand internships and job shadow experiences beyond the magnet school programs.

"Should it be for every kid?" Matthews asked. "Yes, if at all possible," he answered.