Students Gain Technology Skills and Socialize by Volunteering at the Technology Helpdesk

Jan 28 2022

Briarcliff High School and Middle School students and staff who bring their devices to the helpdesk at the high school library might notice that some of the people helping them are a little, well, young. That is because several high school students participate in a program in which they learn to assist others with their devices, either with troubleshooting the software or by fixing the hardware.

Students as young as in ninth grade are learning to fix laptops, iPads and even TV monitors during their free period at the high school and get a feel for what working as a helpdesk technician is like.

The program, conceived and organized by Briarcliff Technology Director Erica Beasley, has been running for several years.

“Erica had this idea that since we are a 1:1 school, we should always have a student-run helpdesk to help students and staff,” said Briarcliff Technical Support Specialist John Gonsalves, who is also in charge of the student helpdesk program.

When Mr. Gonsalves joined the district back in 2017, he and other members of the technology department, also known as “tech crew,” took a two-week summer course to be certified to do Apple hardware repairs in both laptops and iPhones.

“We learned how to open up a computer and repair it,” Mr. Gonsalves said. “Erica’s vision was to create an ambiance at the school that is similar to the Apple Genius Bar and have an open, welcoming space, which is what we have here at the library.”

Mr. Gonsalves, who holds a degree in computer science from Boston University, has always enjoyed hardware and shares his vast knowledge with the student helpdesk technicians.

“The students come in during their free period or study hall and help anyone who shows up. If there is no work they can just do school work,” he said. “They get a half credit for this and a pass/fail grade, although I have never given a “fail” to anyone. They all want to help others and will ask me or anyone else from the tech crew if they need further assistance.”

Anyone interested in participating in the program can reach out to Mr. Gonsalves and set up an interview. Eighth graders who are interested in joining when they enter high school can reach out to Guidance Counselor Sara Piersons.

“During the interview I will speak with the students and I can get a pretty good idea if they have genuine interest,” Mr. Gonsalves said. “I teach them everything they need to know. All they need is to have a passion for helping others and an interest in computer software or hardware. Even if they just like gaming that is enough.”
Although freshmen typically do not have study halls or free periods, many come during part of their lunch period to help out.

“I have known about this program ever since I was in elementary school because John was there,” he said. “We had been talking about it for a while and I have always been interested in computers and repair. I think this stuff is really cool.”

According to Oliver, who hopes to take a computer science class at the school next year, even if someone is not into the repair aspect, they can assist in other ways, such as helping with software or ordering parts.

There is also the benefit of gaining a skill that can be used outside of the school.

“It’s really cool to learn about these things. I can also use this knowledge to help other family members,” he said.

Junior Noah Hirschhorn agrees.

“What we learn here definitely transfers to our own lives – a lot of kids will come to me first before opening a ticket at the helpdesk because they know I can help,” he said.

Freshman Amir Anzer helps mostly with the software and enjoys interacting and socializing with other students while assisting them.

“It’s really fun here,” he said. “You get to learn and have fun at the same time. Noah and John are my best buds.”

“This is a place to build confidence,” Mr. Gonsalves said. “Helping at the helpdesk can get shy students to talk and interact with their peers and staff members more. They not only learn how to provide technical support, but also how to speak to others and improve communications.”

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