



# Welcome!

## Paris Echoles

**KUSD: Student Engagement and Equity Coordinator**

***You're the KUSD Coordinator for Student Engagement and Equity. What would you describe as the main responsibilities of your position?***

Being in the Office of Student Engagement and Equity, my responsibilities include, but are not limited to the following: working on initiatives and programs that are involved in providing students the opportunities to extend academic learning inside and outside of the classroom, bringing in services and individuals during the school day to enhance student academic achievement, build relationships between students within KUSD and caring individuals in our community. Some of the other responsibilities I have include working to oversee the Attendance Improvement Means Success (AIMS) office and district-wide middle school and high school mentoring.

***Your favorite part of the position?***

Essentially, it is working with kids and knowing that I'm able to be there to help these students get what they need to feel a part of their school environment in a positive way. A large part of my work is overseeing the CLC's (21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers). Obviously, you have the mentoring piece, all of the volunteers working with kids in various levels throughout the district, providing them with the services and the support that they need to succeed. Because of my personal background, I am able to work with many students who are growing up facing similar trials and tribulations I encountered as a child. I feel delighted to work with them and help them get to a place in their lives where they feel they are accomplished individuals academically, socially, and emotionally.

***In what ways do you see your position and your program making an impact on mentoring for students at KUSD? How do you think mentoring can be valuable for students?***

Again, you have the MKR partnership that adds the mentoring component throughout the district that my office oversees as well. Knowing that MKR is in a position to link mentors with mentees, and work with the data surrounding the academic achievement of the students participating in mentoring, we are able to collaborate and strategize ways to best meet student needs. This is all just part of my job. It's all about building those relationships that research has found to be vital for student academic success in the classroom. MKR is a critical piece in providing those key relationships and bringing in individuals of different backgrounds to work with all of our students in our district to support academic achievement.

***What inspired or motivated you to pursue the work you do today?***

Because I was raised in an impoverished, single-parent household, and I lost my dad to gang and drug violence at a very young age. I grew up with a passion for trying to figure out what I needed to do to make sure that I didn't have to experience the same ills of society in my adult life that I experienced as a child. I also have a younger brother and sister who I had to guide and help in many ways as my mom was trying to be the head of the household. I had to help them academically with school and keep them engaged, so the passion and desire to help others started at a very young age in my life.

***Have you or the district set program goals around mentoring with teachers and/or administration over the next few years?***

KUSD's Transformation Plan has goals surrounding student engagement and achievement and closing achievement gaps between students. These goals are all tied to MKR. Research says building positive relationships and positive role models will help us bridge these gaps and work toward keeping students connected to our schools. There are many examples of people who kids can look to and say "This person has gone through the same struggles I have," or "this person cares about me," and then they want to do their best so they can make them [mentors] happy and proud of their accomplishments. Another piece of the Transformation Plan is building important community partnerships that address student needs. KUSD has ties not only to UW-Parkside, but other communities like Racine, who have similar youth issues and demographics as ours in Kenosha. We can come together to bounce off ideas like, "What are you doing well, or what are we doing well?" This also provides an outlet for us to talk about how we can come together to make sure all students needs are being met in both communities. It will take a collaborative approach to be successful.

***Are there any personal goals that you would add on? Things that you yourself would like to see accomplished?***

The Transformation Plan is an excellent document because it references building community partnerships and how it relates to building the entire student, so that they can truly achieve academic success. That's essentially what it's all about: How can we take a student and make them *complete*? How can we get them ready to succeed in our global society and in their lives after they graduate from KUSD. We have to focus on trying to make our society better at a local level to ensure that the students in Kenosha are prepared to enter our competitive global society and thrive. That's what attracted me to Kenosha. The district's programming and initiatives are aligned with my personal goals, my thoughts, and my beliefs about education in this country.

***How do you feel that Mentor KR can help reach district goals of mentoring, and the goals that you have set?***

It's great for students at a young age, even in elementary and middle school, to know that our district is partnering with a university to meet our needs. A lot of students may not believe in the thought of college, or making it to college, so having this partnership is way to inspire kids to think that UW - Parkside is a place where they can have the option to attend in the future. They might see UW - Parkside as an institution that wants them on campus, and will offer them the resources that they need to succeed.

***What is your relationship directly to the mentors from Mentor KR that mentor in the schools?***

The Office of Student Engagement and Equity oversees mentoring throughout the district. You can simply say that I'm a liaison, but at the same time I believe I must be "hands-on." I must get involved as much as possible and facilitate the connection that goes on between MKR and KUSD. Also, I must have contact with the mentors, pop in and out to have discussions with them on what exactly they think can be improved, and discuss what they think should stay the same. Also, I must work with students to find out how their experience with their mentor can be improved.

***What does your department do to support the mentor/student match process?***

My team is responsible for conducting the Mentee Selection Process and making sure that we follow the necessary guidelines. We work closely with mentors, mentees, counselors and school officials to make sure students are being placed with the best match for them. These matches create opportunities for students to get what they need academically in the schools and can help build their character as people socially. These matches can be done on paper, checking the boxes and filling-in answers to get the quantitative data, but you need to look at that qualitative piece as well. You should be talking to individuals involved and talking with students to try and find the best possible person for them to be

matched with. The best way to find that out is to talk with the students directly. We must also explain to them that having a mentor is not a negative thing and how it benefits them as a person and academically. It would be great to get to a point where all students say, "I want a mentor."

***If a mentor is having concerns with their mentee (trouble connecting/maintain contact, mentee exhibits odd behavior, mentor/mentee match, etc.) who do they address their concerns to?***

There are district-wide policies on how to address problems and behaviors that arise. As officials we're required to report anything we hear that is detrimental to that child's, or any other child's, safety. We have the liaisons, support services, social workers, psychologists, etc. who can give us the support to help that child in need.

***As you become a part of the mentoring team, what is the best advice you can give to mentors as they begin to get involved and interact with your students in the schools?***

The best advice that I can give to mentors is to understand that all students are unique and have positive qualities regardless of their socioeconomic background, skin color, and/or ability. No matter what you may hear about their culture or ethnic background, no matter what you hear about certain schools, we are here to serve these students. We are here to provide these students with the necessary tools, skills and knowledge that they need to succeed. Many of these kids just need positive role models. We have to show them that we genuinely care about their well-being. Students are very bright. Regardless what their grades show, regardless of what individuals may say about them, they understand when people are truly there and respecting them as people. They know when people actually believe in them and that's huge. Once a student understands, genuinely, that the person they work with has high expectations for them, and wants them to work hard and succeed, those students will do everything in their power to make sure that person in their life who was pushing them to meet those high expectations is happy. "Don't have deficit thinking." Understand that every person is an individual and has positive qualities that they can contribute to an excellent mentoring relationship that ultimately impacts the society in which we all live.