

I Could Be Helping Kids

Adam Aberman MPP 1999 vividly remembers his high school experience with guidance counselors, and it wasn't good. So not good, in fact, that his parents had to hire a private guidance counselor to help him figure out what his talents were, what future careers he was interested in, and what colleges to apply to.

His experience, he knows, isn't unique. "I haven't met a single person who remembers his or her high school guidance counseling as being effective," Aberman says. "In a lot of cases, however, it wasn't for lack of trying."

In many school systems, Aberman says, guidance counselors are too overburdened to help most students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, average caseloads in the United States' 100 largest school districts range from 323 to as high as 950 students per counselor.

Aberman knew he had to help. So, equipped with education-related experience as a Spanish bilingual teacher in Los Angeles, a volunteer in several inner-city Boston charter schools, and as the Brooklyn field rep for the New York City Board of Education, Aberman decided to take a leap: he ditched the full-time job and started his own education nonprofit.

Just a little more than a year after he started toying with the idea and wrote up a business plan, his nonprofit is now a reality.

"When I was a second grade bilingual teacher, the most effective tool I had was getting kids out of the classroom," he says, explaining where he came up with the idea for *icouldbe* — a Web-based career resource primarily for elementary and secondary students, as well as for school staff and parents.



“As soon as they stepped out the door, they were learning,” he says. “So, partly based on this realization, and because I saw firsthand the disparities between high and low-income kids, I came up with an idea that helps kids think beyond the walls of the school.”

The idea is based on using the Internet, which he knew would be the ideal way to reach the most kids and would allow them to move beyond their immediate walls. The result is a Web site (www.icouldbe.org) that allows students to work independently or in conjunction with parents, therefore reducing the caseload for guidance counselors. Initially, school districts, schools, after-school programs, and even individual households subscribe to the site. Then, each student logs in and fills out a custom career survey that asks questions about hobbies, skills, and academic interests. Based on the survey, a list of results is generated from a massive database that Aberman has been creating with the help of volunteer “mentors.” The list links students to bio pages of career mentors that match their profile, as well as local internship opportunities, job shadowing available in that area, a description of relevant careers, and narratives on related companies. The student can click through and explore all the links instantaneously or save the results in a personalized portfolio to be looked at later. They can also send questions to mentors they are matched with and can later go back to their portfolio and modify answers as interests and hobbies change.

“The idea is not to pigeonhole kids,” he says, noting that if the results match a student with a graphic designer, animator, and Web architect, the student shouldn’t feel those are the only options. “This site is a chance to imagine and expand on what a student could — not should — be,” he says.

The options will become even greater as the database of mentors grows. Currently it’s filled with about 250 names, culled from Aberman’s high school, Vassar College (where he went as an undergrad),

I HAD A VISION OF MAKING A
DIFFERENCE IN EDUCATION.

I THOUGHT THERE WOULD BE
SOME MAGIC BULLET. IN ANY

FIELD YOU’RE IN, YOU REALIZE

THERE IS NO MAGIC BULLET.

and Kennedy School networks. In fact, nearly 70 of the group’s mentors are Kennedy School alumni, including Julie Lane MPP 1999, who is also serving as *icouldbe*’s primary consultant. Interestingly, Aberman says, so far more women than men have signed on as mentors.

“Women tend to want to do this more than men,” he says, sitting in the Forum one afternoon during a trip to Cambridge to talk with potential funders. “Overall, however, I’m finding that both genders really do want to help kids, and this is a way for them to do that without necessarily committing a full day.”

icouldbe’s mentors don’t actually meet one-on-one with students like traditional mentoring does (a type of personal mentoring that Aberman says he in no way wants to supplant). Instead, because everything is done online, mentors initially submit a bio of themselves for the database and agree to regularly answer questions sent by students who are matched to them.

Currently schools and programs must pay a fee to subscribe to the site (one fee for the entire school or program), which Aberman says he tried to keep reasonable. He hopes that, in the future, local busi-

nesses will “sponsor” schools and that he will offer low-income discounts.

“The fee is affordable,” he says, noting that the money will be put back into the nonprofit, not to make him rich.

“My primary goal is to inspire kids. I didn’t go into education to make money,” he says, laughing. “That’s why I don’t have any savings.”

Part of this public service drive to help others comes from his parents and grandparents, he says. Growing up in a close family in Los Angeles, Aberman was influenced by the work ethic of his activist mother, who worked in the home and started her own anti-mini mall campaign, and by his father, who owned a small veterinarian practice.

“I think how things can change so much from generation to generation,” he says. “My dad’s dad was a Jew from the Ukraine who was sponsored to come to the United States. He hit the road and was an amateur boxer and pool shark. He later opened a general store that made enough money to send my father to college and veterinary school. My dad didn’t grow up with money, but did fairly well for himself. There was a drive for him to succeed so that I wouldn’t have to worry about money and could do what I wanted to in life.”

The result, he says, is that he was encouraged to not only think creatively, but also to act on his ideas and desires. This same kind of encouragement, he says, should be available to all kids. *icouldbe*, he hopes, will play a small role in doing that.

“There’s a need,” he says. “I know this from what others say and from my gut. When I moved to Los Angeles and was initially working for an education nonprofit, I had a vision of making a difference in education. I thought there would be some magic bullet. In any field you’re in, you realize there is no magic bullet.”

But perhaps, a magic Web site. — LH