

PARTNER CONTENT

Colo. Program Puts Students on the Pathway to a Career

By Rebecca Jones, *Education News Colorado*

Janet Mensah isn't exactly Doogie Howser but, like the prodigal TV doctor, she has already been accepted to medical school. Just 18, she knows she wants to become a gastroenterologist.

 [Back to Story](#)

Aurora students Ona Kola-Kehinde, left, and William Damon, explain pulse oximetry in a mock hospital room on Thursday.

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Of course she has to graduate from high school first, which she'll do this spring, from Aurora's William Smith. She's been accepted into the **BA/BS-MD program** at the University of Colorado Denver so once she's received her bachelor's degree, she'll go straight into her medical studies.

But in one sense, she's already commenced her medical work. She's enrolled in the Health Careers **pathways program** at her school. Her first class was Introduction to the Medical Sciences, followed by a class in Human Body Systems, and a class in Medical Interventions. She discovered her interest in the digestive system—and gastroenterology—in the Human Body Systems class.

"While many students are still trying to decide their career paths, I already know mine," she said Thursday, while speaking to a crowd of adults gathered to celebrate the district's Academic and Career Pathways program.

"Life changes, and I'll change"

"Life changes, and I'll change," she said later, assessing the wisdom of settling on a medical specialty before she even gets out of high school. "But I'm convinced I'll still want to do this."

Janet Mensah, a student at Aurora's William Smith High School, is interested in a career as a gastroenterologist.

Aurora Superintendent John Barry likes to point to students such as Mensah when skeptics wonder whether the district's ground-breaking career-focused curriculum is really working.

"This is clear evidence of the unique things in Aurora Public Schools," he said at the gathering, meant to showcase the work students are doing in the four career pathways: Health Sciences; Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM); Business; and Arts and Communication. "What we're seeing today is unique in the nation."

Lt. Gov. Joe Garcia praised the district for advancing the notion of "P-20" education, shorthand for an integrated education system that extends from preschool through graduate school. In Aurora, students can start taking career pathways classes as early as elementary school.

"Colorado does have a national reputation as a leader in P-20, and Aurora is one of the leading districts in the state in demonstrating what's possible," he said. "Schools need to partner with the business community so we're not just handing kids off, not knowing if they're really prepared to be successful in the workforce."

Students Can Sample a Variety of Careers

Students are able to jump from career track to career track, as well as taking their core academic classes. That's

because it's just as important to figure out early on what they're not interested in pursuing as to figure out what they are interested in, Barry said.

Rangeview High School students Brandi Cameron and Stephen Francoeur exhibit the circuit board project they created in their Digital Electronics class.

Brandi Cameron, a 17-year-old student at Rangeview High School, was showing off the circuit board she designed in her Digital Electronics class. Her task was to design a schematic and build a functioning miniature drawbridge, using binary computer code.

She has loved this experience in engineering. But she considers herself "undecided" when it comes to her career path. She's really leaning toward medicine.

"I'm doing an internship at a hospital next year," she said. "But I love working with circuits and engineering, and one day, if I decide I don't want to go into medicine, I'll have all this engineering experience to fall back on. Plus, this class has made me a lot more organized."

Alex Santana, 16, a student at Vista Peak, wants to become a pastry chef. He wants to own his own business. "But before that can happen, I've got to grow my education," he said. "I've got to learn more about the stock market." That's why he's in the Business pathway program at Vista Peak.

So far, he's not only learned about the stock market and managing a portfolio, he's become certified in Microsoft Word, Excel and Power Point programs, as well as becoming a certified blogger. "I'm much closer to my dream by being able to create and use the technical documents," he said.

Medical Careers a Popular Option

In one corner of the room at the district's Professional Learning and Conference Center, students had set up a mock hospital room, and Health Careers students were showing off some of the skills they'd learned.

Seventeen-year-old Damon Williams, a William Smith student, was explaining how a pulse oximeter works, using a computerized mannequin of a baby.

"I got to work side by side with an RN at Children's Hospital," he said later, after explaining the process. "We had patients come in with all sorts of different things. I saw a case where an infant came in who was believed to be affected by bed bugs."

Williams, too, is an aspiring doctor. "I already knew I wanted to study medicine," he said. "This has just helped me know more about what it will be like. It's been a very enriching experience."

Brittany Wright, a 17-year-old Aurora Central student, isn't envisioning a career as a physician. "I got to intern at a lab where we made vaccines," she said. "I think this pathway can help you work in any medical career."

Hinkley High School student Ona Kola-Kehinde, 17, is also looking to a career in medicine, and he's grateful for this time of early preparation. "Right now, you can mess up a little," he said. "I'm having fun right now. Later on, it will be time to get serious."



Janet Mensah, a student at Aurora, Co.'s William Smith High School, is interested in a career as a gastroenterologist.
—Rebecca Jones at EdNews Colorado



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