



Education

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Julia Steiny: Teaching “work-ready” skills to students who are falling between the cracks.

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Some kids aren't going to college. Blasphemous perhaps, but true.

Heck, high school is so oppressive to roughly 30 percent of American students, they drop out entirely, never mind getting to higher ed.

So the relentless droning on about college only pushes those kids out harder.

Mike Connolly, the Pawtucket School District's coordinator of applied learning, says, “We have to keep kids in school so they'll graduate. We have to improve their attendance, scores and so forth. But the main thing for me is to help them see that Shea is not the end of the line. Planned or not, they have a future.”

Just imagining what might be next is a huge step for many kids.

So in 2005, Connolly developed a Government and Public Administration Academy for Shea High School. It was the first of several Pawtucket programs designed to give students hands-on experiences in real-world workplaces. Academies, a national school-to-career strategy, offer industry certifications for immediate employment or agreements with colleges to give course credits to kids as incentive to finish an advanced degree. That first academy has become a national model.

But Pawtucket's academies — Law and Public Safety, Marketing and Merchandising, Graphic Design — still didn't appeal to kids who just want to be done with school ASAP.

So Connolly and his colleagues went back to the drawing board to create a more generic “Ready-to-Work Pathway” program for the kids falling between the cracks.

This fall, 50 kids entered Shea's program. Their teacher, Susan Cipriano, taught them “work-ready” skills interviewing, resumé-writing, dressing for success as well as secure entry-level skills in writing, math and technology.

On Tuesday afternoons, the kids learned job-specific skills, usually from outsiders. Then on Thursdays, they went into the community and applied their skills. One kid worked in a garage, several in a daycare.

I met with a very excited group, all of whom said their lives had been deeply changed by learning to work with people with developmental disabilities. The Arc of Blackstone Valley provided the trainer and the placement experiences.

The students were mostly immigrants from Mexico, Colombia, Mali, Liberia and Cape Verde. Some have language challenges, others special needs of their own. But their training included playing the role of the challenged people they would help on Thursdays. Each pretended to have a disability to be blind or mute and teach a student partner how to help them manage using a wheelchair. Ramata, from Mali, groaned, “this was really hard. I couldn’t talk, so I had to point to everything.”

But Evelyn best expressed the kids’ universal passion for the clients themselves. She burst into tears, “I used to be the type of person who thinks only about myself. But these people helped me mature a lot. They didn’t let their disability stop them. They are rejected by society, kind of left out. We all discovered how much they can do, and how much we can do. They just need a little help. Now I feel the world differently.”

Admiring the Arc’s clients was a big lesson in itself, but the students also began to see clearer paths to a future.

Verkeh, from Liberia, said, “I was thinking a job would be boring. But in this program I realized the people are really interesting, and they’re just like me. Except they really appreciate every little thing in their lives. I want to be a nurse, but before [Ready-to-Work], I slacked off and waited to the last minute. Now I’m ready to work really hard. My grades went up since freshman year, but especially this year.”

In several programs including the Arc and the early-childhood education program, kids can get all their training even before they turn 18, when they can be fully licensed. The Arc’s personal-care attendant jobs start at \$10 an hour and go up to \$20, which beats minimum wage. Graduates from the early-childhood program can get licensed to open a daycare.

Rochelle Lee, the school-based coordinator, works in the community getting and maintaining the internships for Shea’s academies.

She says, “The kids find out that it’s not so bad to function out in the real world. So we work with them to be at least work ready. If you don’t know somebody with a job, how do you know how to get a job? These kids have learned a lot of bad habits. Some have parents who don’t work. Now they can tell their friends that this is a good job and they like doing it. The Arc is always looking for labor that will stick around, so if the kids go to a local college, they can keep working.”

Cipriano, the students’ teacher, says, “Out of 50 kids, not all were successes. But with most we did reach our goals to help them stay in school, be interested and get real-life experience. Now they can go get a job. It was a very positive experience for kids for whom there’s very little positive. For a first year, this program was a great success.”

Connolly says, “Most in this group had lousy attendance; they wanted to leave school. But we got them certified and they see a career. Shea is not the end any more. Most are going to CCRI (Community College of Rhode Island). They finally realize how important an education is.”

Show them, don’t tell them. Makes a huge difference.

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