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Alabama Students with Special Needs Gain Key Workforce Skills with Hands-On Career Instruction



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Brooke Gilmer
Director of Special Education Services
Lauderdale County Schools

Lauderdale County Schools saw an increase of 250% on post-test results (see page 2).

Alabama's Lauderdale County Schools is using the Project Discovery Adapted Career Education Series curriculum from Education Associates to teach students with cognitive disabilities both essential job and life skills and core academics, so they can find meaningful work and live independent lives after high school. The hands-on curriculum is easy to implement and makes teachers' jobs easier—and student gains have proven the program's remarkable effects.

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Brooke Gilmer, Director of Special Education Services

There are many reasons why Brooke Gilmer, director of special education services for Alabama’s Lauderdale County Schools, calls the Project Discovery Adapted Career Education Series from Education Associates her “favorite” curriculum program.

First, it teaches students with severe cognitive disabilities essential job, life, and core curriculum skills, so they can be gainfully employed and live independent lives after high school. “The number one reason my teachers love it is because it’s hands-on. Students don’t just sit in front of a computer or have teacher instruction,” says Gilmer.

Another reason is that the program is easy for teachers to use in their classrooms. “My teachers have loved it,” Gilmer says. “It’s simple and it’s straightforward, and it gives them everything they need without a lot of prep work required.”

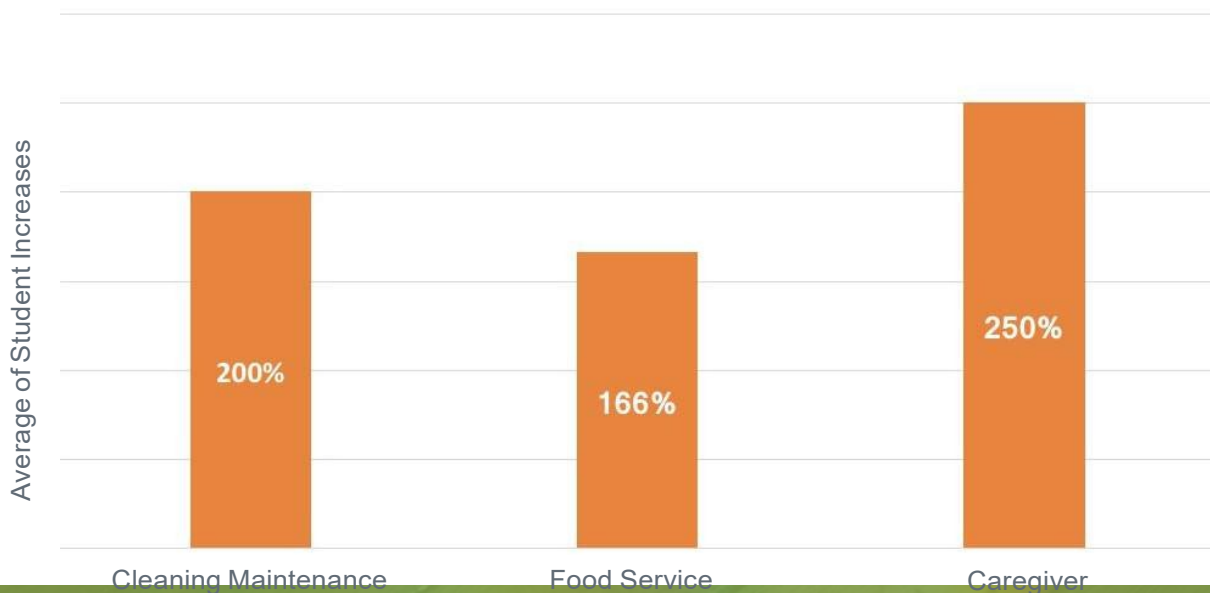
Gilmer says it “just works and meets students where they are.” In fact, it has been tremendously effective for Lauderdale County Schools, where students have seen average gains of more than 200 percent in some skills areas—setting them up for success when they graduate.

Making Teachers’ Jobs Easier

Project Discovery is a career education and life skills transition curriculum that helps students at risk make a seamless transition to life after high school. The program’s Adapted Career Education Series is designed specifically for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities and includes hands-on materials, video modeling, simplified text, worksheets, and integrated audio and visual supports.

The kits cover not only the most common jobs that individuals with disabilities are likely to find in their community, such as food service or cleaning and maintenance workers, but other career areas as well. Additionally, students learn basic life skills such as using money and communication skills.

Post-test Score Increases



In Gilmer's district, there are five self-contained secondary classrooms for students with moderate to severe special needs, ranging in age from 13 to 21. In the past, the teachers in these classrooms have tried to teach units similar to what the Adapted Career Education Series covers by putting together their own lesson plans and assessments. But "teachers don't have the time to do that," Gilmer says.

Implementing the Adapted Career Education Series has made her special-education teachers' jobs much easier. The curriculum "comes in one kit that includes pre-assessments, post-assessments, the instructions, the materials—everything that teachers need. It was wonderful," she notes. "Project Discovery is implemented more consistently by my teachers than other transition programs. They don't have to spend 15 hours studying a computer program."



Bringing Key Concepts to Life

As Lauderdale County teachers have used the kits, they have been able to teach core curriculum skills in subjects such as reading, math, and science in addition to teaching basic job and life skills. For instance, while students are learning to make change for customers in the food service curriculum, they are also developing key math skills.

This integration of job skills and core academics saves teachers time. "If you're teaching 15 students, and you have students across grades seven through 12, that's a lot of standards you're trying to hit in every subject," Gilmer explains. "Anything that we can do to help teachers hit multiple standards in one lesson makes their lives easier."

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The program is correlated to the Alabama Extended Standards and helps address the transition part of IEPs. But it also makes learning more effective, because students are learning hands-on job skills and academics in a real-world context that brings concepts to life.

“If you’re working on reading within the context of employment training, it’s a lot more meaningful to the students than sitting down and reading a worksheet and answering questions about it,” she observes.

A ‘Great Investment’

When Lauderdale County first purchased the curriculum, they had trainers from Education Associates come out and show teachers how to use it effectively—even though “it’s a very self-explanatory program,” Gilmer says. “There’s not a huge learning curve for teachers.” As a result of this focus, Lauderdale County’s special-education teachers have implemented the program with fidelity.

Gilmer appreciates the hands-on nature of the curriculum. “This population of students struggles if you stand up at the front of the room and try to teach them something,” she says. “They have trouble generalizing skills. They have to learn within the context of doing something, and I think that is what has made the difference for us.”



Lauderdale County has seen remarkable gains after using the Adapted Career Education Series kits. The average increase in students’ skills from the pre-test to the post-test has been 166 percent for the food service module, 200 percent for the cleaning maintenance module, and 250 percent for the caregiver module. Most importantly, students leave school equipped with the skills needed to live a more independent life.

“Without question, the Adapted Series is my favorite program that we have implemented,” Gilmer concludes. “It’s user friendly and removes a lot of the prep work and guesswork for teachers. Importantly, it teaches students in the way that they learn best.”

Without question, the Adapted Career Education Series is my favorite program that we have purchased. It removes a lot of the prep work and guesswork for teachers, and it teaches students in the way they learn best.