

Careers in the Making

Project Discovery & Achieve Life Skills Courses Provide Employment Opportunities for All Learners

We are 50 miles from the nearest Vo-Tech school and commercial hub. Ten years ago, we selected Project Discovery and Achieve Life Skills to equip us with in-house tools to prepare our learners to be job and life ready.

- Karen Squires, Director of Student Learning, Red River Parish, LA

There was an unfortunate time when our collective mentality regarding students with cognitive impairments and learning disabilities could best be described as 'harm reduction'. Learners were grouped according to ability, and those deemed less likely to succeed at higher function careers were discouraged from developing expectations for their own performance.

In Louisiana's Red River Parish and schools across the country, a quiet revolution has been happening in the way that educators are preparing students in both General Education and Special Education for the workforce and for independent living. Using innovative, hands-on job preparation and life skills curriculum from Education Associates, teachers are rewriting the expectations for all learners.



Students enrolled in Red River High School's Certified Nursing Assistant course, in collaboration with Northwest Louisiana Technical College

Life Skills Training Leads to CTE & Job Prep

Karen Squires is the Director of Student Learning for the Red River Parish Schools in Coushatta, LA. She is responsible for supervising core education courses, providing professional development and overseeing teacher evaluations for this rural district of 1,500 students. In her previous role as Special Education Director, she supervised daily operations in the Special Ed department and all transition for the district.

A decade ago, she first encountered Education Associates and incorporated its comprehensive curriculum for Job Preparation (Project Discovery) and Life Preparation (Achieve Life Skills). She realized that this curriculum was the perfect tool to provide Career & Technical Education (CTE) for both General Ed and SPED students in her school system. In an innovative move, she flipped the order that this curriculum is typically administered.

***We start students with the Job Prep & Employability titles from Achieve Life Skills.
We have them prepare and interview for a job-specific Project Discovery course.
In our program, we treat everything like it's a career.***

- Karen Squires

By leading with job preparation titles such as 'Completing a Resume' and 'Interviewing for a Job', SPED teachers in Red River Parish equip learners to treat their job-specific courses like the jobs themselves. Once they are 'hired' for a course, students come to class like they will later report to a job, including clocking in using a fingerprint scanner. Every day, students are simultaneously gaining job-specific skills and reinforcing general behavior to make them more effective when functioning independently in the workforce.



We start with vocabulary that they'll use on the job, and we adjust it to their current level. Education Associates' curriculum incorporates key vocabulary along with hands-on activities and role play. By the time they graduate, students know how to 'talk the talk'.

- Karen Squires

CTE Preparation in Four Career Pathways

When students first enter high school, they are guided through an 'interest inventory' to evaluate their passion and aptitude for various career pathways. Once they are placed on a pathway, students master at least two Project Discovery kits and one Achieve Life Skills title per year for the first three years. The remaining year is devoted to independent living skills and job-site training.

At Red River High School, all CTE Prep is clustered into four career pathways: Customer Service (e.g. Grocery Clerking, Hair Styling), Hospitality (e.g. Table Service, Health & Nutrition), Agriculture Science (e.g. Greenhouse, Animal Care) and Medical (e.g. Caregiver). Every pathway requires Cleaning Maintenance, Child Care, and various life skills curriculum.

Rather than focus on reading-level, teachers put a huge focus on fundamental, job-specific skills and vocational vocabulary. Using the differentiated instructional methods provided by Education Associates' curriculum, teachers can meet students where they are. Instruction and activities are tailored to individual progress.

CTE Prep for Work as a Certified Nursing Assistant

Red River High School has been qualified by the State of Louisiana to offer a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) certification course. In collaboration with Northwest Louisiana Technical College, students work under the instruction of Registered Nurses (RNs) to complete this college-level course. By incorporating Education Associates' Caregiver and Medical Patient Care hands-on curriculum, instructors are able to tailor instruction to students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Each semester, a handful of our students pass the CNA exam. Generally, one or two of them are on IEPs. That accomplishment wouldn't be possible without the 'Caregiver' and 'Medical Patient Care' titles from Project Discovery.

- Karen Squires

Ultimately, students on IEPs pass the same rigorous CNA exam administered to all applicants for this certification. Not only are these students graduating high school, they are emerging having tackled college-level material and mastered specific skills. Using these skills and this certification, students are well-prepared to apply for much-needed positions in local institutions such as hospitals and nursing homes.

Using curriculum from Education Associates, Megan Bryan completed the CNA Course at Red River High School. She is currently a Certified Nursing Assistant at a skilled nursing facility nursing home.



What's Next?

The educational accomplishments of this rural Louisiana parish have drawn significant attention. Red River Parish underwent a 16-month \$30M capital project to furnish the community with much needed upgrades to school facilities and a brand-new Career and Technical Education facility. For this school system, taking an adapted, tailored approach to Vocational Education doesn't mean limiting the options for students with special needs.

When students come to us in Kindergarten, we should be asking them 'What do you want to do when you graduate?' From there, everything should be structured toward getting them to that goal.

- Karen Squires

This level of ambition for the students of the community takes more than a positive attitude and an open mind. It also requires the right tools. For educators of Red River Parish, the solution has come in the form of the Project Discovery and Achieve Life Skills curriculum from Education Associates.