

Missouri School District Ensures Workplace Success: Starts Transition Early and Culminates with Innovative “Job in the Lab” Program!

Dawn Hesse, a Transition Coordinator for the Francis Howell School District in Saint Charles, Missouri, believes career exploration and job skills training should start early, especially for students with multiple disabilities. “Transition begins when teachers have a clear vision of a student’s aptitude and an understanding of



their specific talents and interests,” she says. “Students must also have a sense of what they want to do after school.”

In this article, we share the district’s four-year implementation process that takes students from general instruction to a very narrow competitive job skill set to accomplish a successful transition for students in 9th through 12th or ages 18-21.

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How the District Formulated a Comprehensive Transition Program

Five years ago, the district, under the direction of Dr. Will Vanderpool, the Director of Special

Education, chose Project Discovery, a comprehensive and adapted career and job skills training curriculum, to prepare students in three high schools for post-school transition.

Hesse says, “We really like the product. It would be difficult for teachers to develop a curriculum that includes a functional scope and sequence, hands-on activities, tools and assessments. Post-secondary transition works when teachers are able to deliver detailed instruction. Project Discovery gave us the backbone to develop a four-year career education program for every learner, even those who are exceptionally challenged.”

Creating Student Specific Career Pathways

As students enter the 9th grade, they are given a job skills assessments or “interest inventory” as Hesse describes it. This data provides a starting point to identify students’ unique talents and interests. This information, along with class discussions, career-based field trips, parent input, and student aptitude are combined to formalize an IEP and career pathway.

Job Skills Instruction for Every Student including those on the Autism Spectrum

With the Project Discovery hands-on curriculum, teachers are provided creative ideas to address the “how-to’s” of job training in the classroom. Along with a carefully-developed IEP, teachers deliver seamless instruction to teach job-related skills. For students who are autistic and non-verbal, the district uses Project Discovery’s adapted modules. “These are ideal for students with low aptitude and reading level,” shares Hesse. “They learn job skills by looking at printed lessons with visual images and cues. The flexibility of the program broadens our capability to teach entry-level job skills to students with significant disabilities.”

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Hands-On Job Tasks and Tools with Integrated Academics Make Learning Relevant for the Students



Teachers assign students hands-on activities in career fields such as child care, hair care, landscaping, retailing, carpentry, electrical and construction. Students perform the tasks using work-relevant tools, such as styling brushes, garden equipment, hammers, wall sections and wiring!

The curriculum also integrates functional reading and math applications into the job skills lessons so students learn to apply them to real-world job activities.

The Pre-Post Tests and Work Performance Benchmarks Establish Important Baselines for the Students



Work performance benchmarks and Pre-post tests provide a baseline of information the district can use to guide instruction, manage student outcomes and prepare legal compliance documentation required by IDEA Law under the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education. Hesse says, “Parents also like to see data about the types of career fields their child is learning in school. It reinforces family involvement.”

“Job in the Lab” Program Helps Students Thrive in the Workplace

In addition to the four-year transition program, the district also offers a “job in the lab,” pilot program to give students additional time to practice and enhance their hands-on job experiences. Occupational and Physical Therapists are on hand to help students increase their stamina and fine motor skills. Employers in the community, such as realtors, provide job tasks. Another local partnership with hospitals provides job experiences for students who are high-functioning.

“Our transition process is designed to equip all students to be career ready as early as possible,” says Hesse. “Project Discovery gives students very transferable skills for competitive jobs, even for the most significantly challenged. We want every student to be as productive as they can when they reach adulthood.”