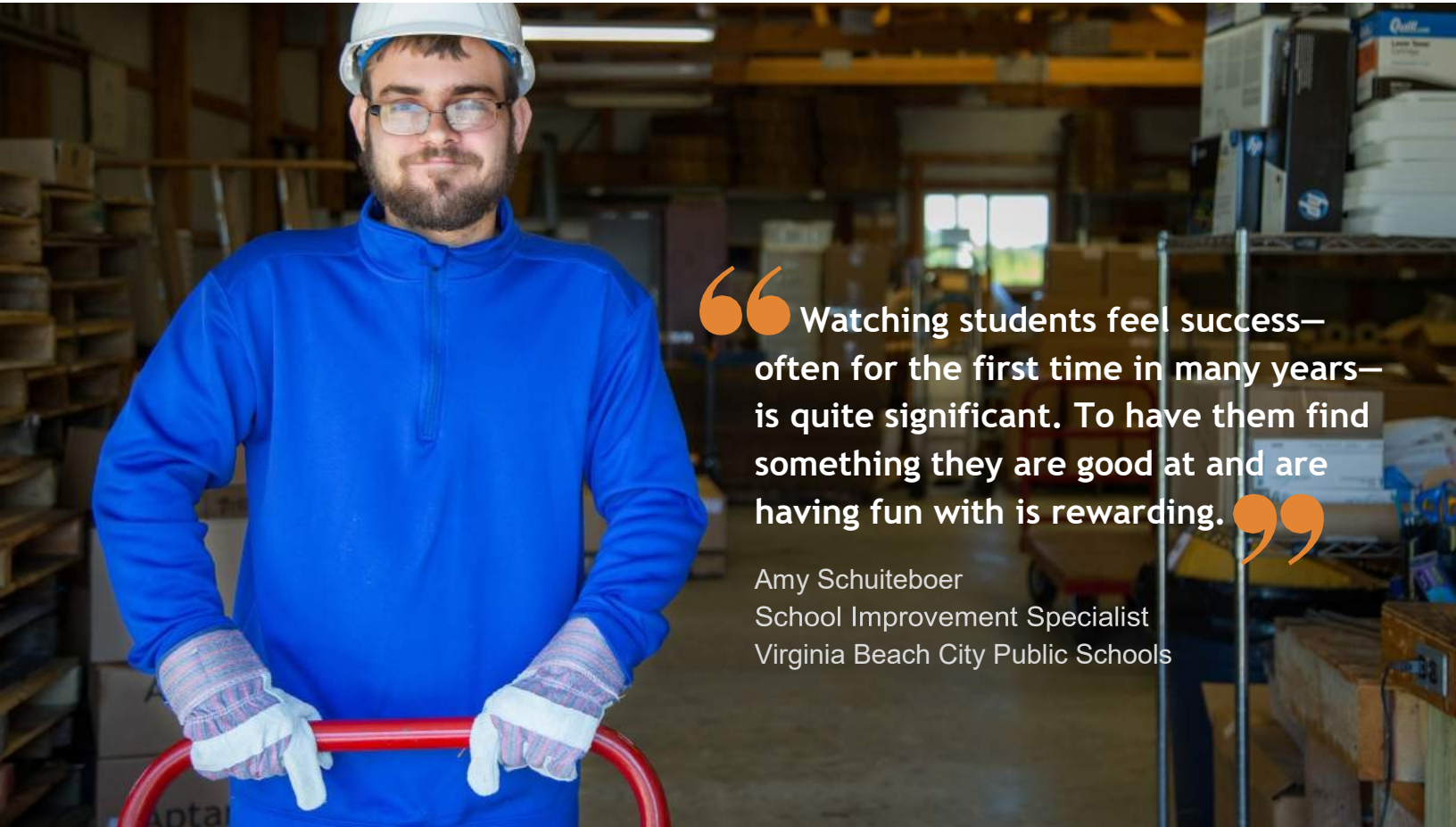




Students with Special Needs Explore Newfound Interests, Skills and Self-Confidence with 'Adapted Curriculum'



“ Watching students feel success— often for the first time in many years— is quite significant. To have them find something they are good at and are having fun with is rewarding. ”

Amy Schuiteboer
School Improvement Specialist
Virginia Beach City Public Schools

Preparing students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities for the workforce and independent living can be challenging. But Virginia Beach City Public Schools has seen great success using the Adapted modules of Project Discovery, a transition curriculum from Education Associates.

With the help of this hands-on curriculum that teaches critical job and life skills, the school division's students with special needs are graduating with the abilities and the confidence they need to make it on their own.

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Getting students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities ready for the workforce and for independent living can be challenging. But when educators see their students with special needs achieve success, it's incredibly gratifying.



Amy Schuiteboer, School Improvement Specialist

Virginia Beach City Public Schools has helped prepare hundreds of students with cognitive challenges for gainful employment using the Adapted version of Project Discovery, a transition curriculum from Education Associates.

With the aid of this hands-on curriculum that teaches both job and life skills, the school division's students with special needs are graduating with the abilities and the confidence they need to make it on their own.

“Watching students feel success—often for the first time in many, many years—is quite significant,” says Amy Schuiteboer, school improvement specialist for Virginia Beach City's Salem High School. “To have them find something they are good at and are having fun with is very rewarding.”

Hands-on Materials, Created by Special Educators

Schuiteboer has been in special education for nearly 25 years. She remembers a time when schools weren't preparing students with cognitive disabilities for life after high school nearly as effectively.

“Businesses were finding that it would take extra time and training to get these graduates ready to do their job without assistance,” she says. “And so, they did not think it was financially feasible to hire an individual with a disability.”

As the former transition specialist for the Virginia Beach City Schools, it was Schuiteboer's job to help change that. She and her staff looked for a transition curriculum that would support educators in teaching students with special needs critical career education and employability skills, so they could make a seamless transition to life after high school.

After evaluating different options, Schuiteboer recommended that the school division purchase the Project Discovery Adapted Career Education Series. “The fact that it was written by special education teachers, and that it uses all hands-on materials, was what impressed me about the product and set it apart from others,” she says.





The Adapted Career Education Series kits offer hands-on materials, simplified text and worksheets, and integrated audio and visual supports to help students with special needs explore careers, learn job-related tasks and life skills.

The kits cover a diverse range of careers from common jobs that individuals with disabilities are likely to find in their community, such as grocery clerk, retail clerk, or cleaning and maintenance worker, to caregiver and carpentry.

Before using the curriculum, special education teachers in Virginia Beach City were creating their own classroom lessons and materials to teach these concepts.

Now, “the Adapted Career Education Series materials are so comprehensive, and all the work is done for the teachers,” Schuiteboer says. “There is minimal planning required on their part.”

Evidence of Success

Virginia Beach City piloted the Adapted Career Education Series curriculum with a handful of teachers at first, and their feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

“We also had great success with posttests and performance assessments, and that's what convinced me to move forward with the product,” Schuiteboer says. “The following school year, we used it in all of our secondary buildings.”

Schuiteboer now works exclusively at Salem High School, where about 20 students in two special-needs classrooms focus on transition skills during one of their 90-minute instructional blocks.

“We're on a rotating schedule, and so the students receive five blocks of job and life skills instruction every two weeks,” she explains.

Virginia Beach City's use of the curriculum is making a big difference. Across the entire school division, “we have seen at least 40% growth in posttest performance among these students,” Schuiteboer notes. “And on the performance-based assessments that are built into the program, we are seeing consistent threes and fours from our kids on a four-point scale.”

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The curriculum's hands-on approach has proven to be quite effective. "We demonstrate a skill, we do it together, and then the kids are able to do it themselves," she observes.

What's more, students aren't just learning key employability skills. They are also learning essential life skills.

For instance: "The cleaning and maintenance skills transfer to almost any job. I try to help parents understand that we're not training their child to be a custodian, per se, but we're teaching them to be independent. Cleaning their own bathroom—that's huge. It's a life skill that we all need to learn if we want to become more independent. That's just one example of a skill that is really helpful and that carries over into many different environments."

The feedback that Schuiteboer has heard from employers also tells her the program is working.

"In my job as a transition specialist, they would to say to me, 'Wow, Amy! We don't have to spend time training these kids now, because they're already coming to us with the skills they need,'" she says. "Students are learning and practicing those skills before they ever go out into the community."

A Responsive, Caring Company

Not only has the Project Discovery Adapted Career Education Series curriculum been effective—but its provider, Education Associates, has been a joy to work with, Schuiteboer says.

"They want feedback so that they can improve. And they don't just disappear once you've implemented the program," she says. "It's a very responsive company that cares deeply about the students who are being served by these materials."

To illustrate the company's responsiveness, she tells the story of a training session for teachers using the grocery clerking module.



"There were plastic bags and paper bags included in the kit. And I said, 'Where are the reusable bags? It takes very different skills to bag groceries with these different types of bags.' Our sales rep was with me for this training. He walked out into the hallway, made a phone call to the home office—and the next materials we received included reusable bags."

“I truly believe this is the best product out there to help students with disabilities become job ready.”