

Program helps disabled 'STEP' into workforce

By Margaret Blaha

Contributing Writer

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Thanks to a program special to New Jersey, disenfranchised students with disabilities can find assistance in easing into the workforce after graduation.

The School To Employment Program, a state-funded program affiliated with Community Options Enterprises, aims to motivate students with disabilities by providing them with jobs and internships, said Acting Director of Transition Services Carley Pogorzelski. Students learn important skills to help their transition from high school and secure employment.

"We are planning for students to attend the program for a year, figure out what type of employment they would like to be certified in and then [we] will provide them with means to attend classes to come out with certification they can use," she said.

There are no general requirements for students to participate but they are usually referred to the program through the school's special services directors and child study teams, Pogorzelski said. The program works with students who have mild to moderate cognitive abilities, mild physical disabilities and behavioral issues.

Executive Director of STEP Christopher Dixon said while special education in schools has come a long way, there is no focus on employment training, and most organizations provide traditional adult training, which is not targeted toward a student just coming out of high school.

"The goal is for students to eventually leave the job they held in the program and attain a more competitive job elsewhere," Dixon said. STEP representatives attend back-to-school nights and career fairs to market the program to students, she said. They also reach out to parent advocacy groups.

"We have found parents to be STEP's biggest advocates," Pogorzelski said.

STEP is only operational in New Jersey, but Community Options Enterprise hopes to broaden its scope, reaching high school students with disabilities nationwide, she said.

"Not every state has a program like STEP because there are more students than there are resources," Dixon said.

Research conducted by Professor of Labor Studies and Employment Relations Lisa Schur indicates that more than half of the students who graduate from high school who have disabilities do not seek future employment prospects, Pogorzelski said.

"These individuals were typically left sitting at home on the couch watching TV while their family members were working in the community and being contributive members of society," she said.

Schur, who focuses on the American's with Disabilities Act and its relationship to the law and social policies, said her studies show that people with disabilities are more likely to hold "non-standard" jobs that are either part-time or temporary.

Non-standard jobs pay lower wages than full-time positions and offer few or no benefits, she said. In addition, 40 percent of people with disabilities are underemployed, and the majority do not have jobs at all.

She said increasing the number of non-standard work positions may enable more people with disabilities to enter the work force, but employers may not be willing to appropriate money to provide accommodations for part-time workers.

Pogorzelski said the program assists both students and parents in exploring options available to disabled persons so they may lead independent lives. Parents attend workshops that inform them how they can be involved in their child's transition from school to work and also provide information about applying for state funded programs like Community Options.

Last February, students received job training and skills at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in Hamilton, N.J., she said.

Students work with a job coach, an employment specialist and the director of the department of the hospital they're working in, Pogorzelski said. Once they have completed their training, students are employed in different departments, from the emergency room to the gift shop.

STEP, an organization that has supported people with disabilities for 20 years, she said.

"STEP was pitched to the hospitals and school districts several years ago," she said. "However, it never really got off the ground."

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