

THE  
Career Exploration

PROGRAM

## **Career Exploration**

One of the many outstanding programs offered at ACSSSD is the Career Exploration Program. This program is designed to facilitate successful transition from school to adult life for high school aged students with disabilities. The Career Exploration Program was first developed in 1992. Research statistics at that time from the New Jersey Department of Education and the local office of the New Jersey Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services indicated that 21% of all youth with disabilities dropped out of school prior to obtaining a high school diploma. There was therefore a need to develop curriculum and programs that were relevant to students' interests and goals; that would prepare them to succeed in employment and adult life; and that would motivate them to stay in school.

The Career Exploration program includes three components: school-based activities, work-based activities and connecting activities. Each year 100 or more students participate in the school-based component, while approximately 50 more participate in the community work-based component. The program is curriculum driven to address student needs within the domains of Life Skills, Personal-Social Development and Career Awareness, Exploration and Preparation. These curriculum areas are taken from the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards to assure that students are meeting state mandated educational standards. Daily learning is designed to be relevant, realistic and practical for the students involved.

Students begin the Career Exploration program in a school-based component, in which they participate in both academic and career exploration classes. As part of their academic program, students work on developing independent living, personal/social and career preparation skills. Units of study such as banking, budgeting, preparing for a job, interviewing and appropriate communication skills are some of the practical applications of content areas emphasized. The career exploration program starts with classes that incorporate Landscaping/Grounds Keeping, Building Trades, Cottage Industries and Business Technology. In these classes, the primary emphasis is on developing appropriate work attitudes and behaviors, such as attendance, punctuality, cooperation with co-workers and supervisors, confidence and personal responsibility. Students also learn specific career preparation skills in these classes. For example, in the Business Technology class, students learn to create electronic resumes and portfolios, business documents such as cover letters, follow-up letters, business cards and

digital movies. As students progress through the school based component, the career exploration classes grow in scope, and students are provided with Structured Learning Experiences (experiential, supervised in-depth learning experiences designed to offer students the opportunity to more fully explore career interests) in school-based work environments, including a student run restaurant, the school cafeteria, school store, media center and various classroom placements throughout the district.

Following the completion of the school-based component of the program (approximately age 18 in most cases), students are given the opportunity to participate in Structured Learning Experiences in the community for more realistic work experience and job training. In partnership with several area businesses, ACSSSD operates “classrooms without walls” at various locations in the community including three hospitals, a nursing home, two colleges, and three hotel/casinos. At this level of the program, students work under close supervision of a teacher, teacher’s aide and an employee mentor to learn work skills and appropriate work behaviors. Training areas include food services, environmental services, business/clerical work and more. The teacher assigned to the work site works with individual students on career and educational objectives. They also serve to provide assistance to the business’ supervisors and mentors in understanding the Career Exploration Program, its concepts, and the students’ abilities and needs, and can provide personal/career counseling to resolve any issues that may occur at the worksite. Teacher presence at the worksite assures employees/business partners that they will have continuous support, and thus, program and student success.

Student performance is evaluated on a monthly basis. Job placement upon graduation, following training, is about 70%. The program is evaluated through an annual follow-up survey conducted each year with current graduates and graduates from the previous four years. Program changes are developed and implemented to reflect survey results and to respond to changing student needs.

## **GOALS**

1. To assist students in acquiring life skills and personal-social skills so they can function as independently as possible in the home and in the community.
2. To assist students and their families in planning for adult life including work, living and leisure time activities.
3. To provide alternative programs to assist students in developing appropriate career education, work behaviors and attitudes enabling them to obtain and maintain employment, either independently or with supports.
4. To provide a supportive environment and experiences that will promote improvement in self esteem, behavior and social interaction with peers and adults.
5. To promote an atmosphere of collaboration among students, families, school, community and adult service providers to assist students in making an effective transition from school to adult life.

## **ENTRY CRITERIA**

- Eligible for Special Education services as cited in NJAC 6A:14.
- Chronological ages 12-21 years.
- Identified as needing an alternative career education program.

## **PROGRAM DESCRIPTION**

The Career Exploration program has implemented a Tier System designed to provide both school-based and community-based learning. Students progress through the Tier System, which begins at the middle school level. Student achievement and appropriate work behaviors are the pre-requisite skills necessary for movement from one tier to the next. The Tier System provides students with the opportunities to set and reach objectives, develop ownership of their goals, and obtain valuable experiences that facilitate future success. These graduated levels of work experiences reinforce and strengthen the skills necessary for success after graduation.

## **Tier I**

Tier I serves as the introduction and transition of middle school students as they prepare for the Career Exploration program. Tier I provides middle school students between the ages of 12-14 with the initial exposure to the high school's Career Exploration Tier Program. The program is designed to provide support for these students as they prepare to transition from middle school to high school. Tier I offers a half day of transitional academics and a half day of career preparation training, which simulates the half day classes in Tier II of the Career Exploration Program. Job shadowing and job sampling are integral parts of the Tier I program, as well as accessing the high school for lunch and extracurricular activities. Tier I plays a valuable role in facilitating a successful transition for students as they advance to the next step of the Career Exploration Program at the high school level.

## **Tier II**

Tier II is the second level of the High School Career Exploration Program. These students participate in a half-day of transitional academic instruction and a half-day career preparation class. The transitional academic classes provide students with the opportunity to develop independent living, personal/ social skills and career education skills. Practical units of study such as banking, budgeting, preparing for a job, interviewing, completing job applications, and communication skills etc. are content areas emphasized in Tier II. Practical lessons and experiential learning activities are presented both in the classroom and in the community through job shadowing and job sampling.

Career preparation classes of Tier II provide students with work experiences in realistic settings. These classes are designed to develop appropriate work behaviors and attitudes such as: positive work ethic, cooperation with supervisors and co-workers, confidence and personal responsibility and career goals. The career preparation classes include: Building Trades, Landscaping/Grounds Keeping, Business Technology and Cottage Industries.

## **Tier III**

Tier III provides realistic, Structured Learning Experiences, within the school setting, that simulate community based job placements. Transitional

Academics are infused into each class. On a daily basis, students apply and practice language arts, mathematics, science and history skills in various settings. The classes in Tier III include:

- The Forest Restaurant Class – This student run restaurant is open to the public for lunch five days a week, while school is in session. In addition to leaning appropriate work behaviors and attitudes, students learn the basic skills necessary to work in a restaurant.
- The Food Services Class – This class teaches students skills in food preparation and distribution. Students in this program assist in preparing and serving over 500 meals to students and staff throughout the district.
- The Career Sampling Class – This class offers students experiences in a wide range of careers. These experiences include working in Environmental Services, Maintenance, Classroom Assistance, Clerical Work, Mail/Package Delivery, Library Sciences and Food Services. Within each career area, each student is paired with a mentor who teaches specific skills and appropriate work behaviors within these job areas.
- The Marketing Retail Class – This class offers the students the opportunity to work in retail sales and learn the skills necessary to promote and sell merchandise in the school store.

#### **Tier IV**

Tier IV provides the first opportunity for students to transition into a community-based setting for further Structured Learning Experiences. The community-based program is a “classroom without walls” in that the entire community is considered a classroom that provides endless experiential opportunities for learning. Community-based work sites include the following: Shore Memorial Hospital, Atlantic Care Regional Medical Center (City and Pomona divisions), Atlantic Cape Community College, Meadowview Nursing Home, and Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. Within each of these settings there is a full time teacher with up to eight students. Each student is paired with a mentor who teaches the specific job skills of the position and the cultural norms of the work place.

The community work experience provides a setting for students to further develop social skills in an adult world which facilitates maturity and the development of pro-social skills and behaviors.

## **Tier V**

Tier V is the highest level in the program. Students who exhibit independence, highly developed behavioral, social and work skills can be placed in Tier V prior to graduation. Community-based work sites in Tier V are in Atlantic City at the following hotel and casinos: Caesars, Tropicana, and Showboat.

As in Tier IV, each student is paired with a mentor to assist them within the job setting. Many students transition into permanent job placements upon graduation.

The Tier System provides a systematic, organizational sequence of programs. Each Tier within this program provides the students the opportunity to develop appropriate work skills and social behaviors necessary for individual achievement. The Career Exploration Program has resulted in systemic change, national recognition and the continuation of a successful program that supports the needs of middle and high school students, ultimately leading to success upon graduation.