



Baron, age 17, runs a custom embroidery machine in the vocational career area. The class makes custom bats, shirts and other wearables with custom Delcastle embroidery logos. Photo by Thomas Nutter Photography.

Stepping into the Workforce



From special education classes to specialized workforce opportunities **BY MATT AMIS**

FOR THE EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS enrolled in the STEP Program, every opportunity is important. Because each one represents a chance to apply their unique talents to a job of their dreams.

STEP, which stands for Specialized Transition to Employment Pathway, is a certificate-based academic and career training program for special education high schoolers in the New Castle County Vocational Technical School District.

“It’s a program that’s investing in students’ strengths,” says Nathalie Princilus, the district special education transition coordinator. “At times, those can be difficult to see.”

The district-wide program, housed at Delcastle Technical High School, combines a typical academic environment (using a modified

set of Common Core standards tailored to individual students’ learning needs) with on-the-job training—and a dash of the all-important “soft-skills” or employability skills. Students participate in teacher-designed, community-based outings throughout the year, and in volunteer or cooperative employment when opportunities arise. All the while, they work on tackling the crucial real-world challenges that every young person entering the adult world does: like transportation, functional living skills, social or interpersonal skills, organizational skills, safety, and employability skills.

Teachers and staff work closely with students to match their unique skills and abilities to promising careers, often utilizing partnerships in the local community. Job placements for STEP students range from

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retail giants to supermarkets to daycare centers and restaurants. The News Journal, Masley Enterprises, Inc., St. Francis Hospital, and the Wilmington Blue Rocks all count themselves among STEP employers.

“A student [who is on the special education] spectrum thrives on sameness and routine, same thing every time,” Princilus says. “That may not always be great in social situations, but in a technical work setting that can be very fruitful.”

In 2010, David Jezyk, who heads the district’s exceptional students department, spearheaded a program review and subsequent reboot that was in-line with national best practices. The district then went out to the local business and nonprofit community to forge connections for their students, ranging from part-time, full-time, volunteer, or even job-shadowing opportunities. In every year since then, STEP has met its ambitious goal of connecting every single student with work experiences has come to fruition.

STEP not only introduces students—who are often overlooked by employers—to the world of work, it also provides an important sense of independence and transition for entire families at a time. While students enrolled in STEP can choose to remain on after senior year through the district’s 18-21 program, question marks often remain for special needs students and their families once they’ve aged out of school, and the supports that come with it. STEP has erased many of those fears.



A student attendant discusses the different designs and custom embroidery being offered at the Delcastle school store. Photo by Thomas Nutter Photography.

“What I’m most proud of is that you’re not only impacting that student’s life, you’re impacting that entire family,” Princilus says. “I’ve seen so many parents who are fearful of the transition, fearful of the unknown, because who’s going to take care of their kids? But when they see the positivity of the transition and their child saying, ‘I can conquer work, I can conquer my community, my transportation,’ and so on, they realize my young adult is self-actualizing, and they can too.” ■

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