

Vocational/Work Experience Program—WINGS Grant

*Tallwood High School
Virginia Beach, Virginia*

A local fried chicken restaurant helped special education students at Tallwood High School soar toward a brighter future as part of a new vocational training program last year. The school's Vocational/Work Experience Program brought students with special needs to Chick-fil-A to learn the skills required for jobs in the real world.

Tallwood has offered a vocational training program for students without disabilities for many years. Through unpaid internships, these students had opportunities to explore various careers.

Two years ago, special education and other teachers decided they were not doing enough to help their students with special needs prepare for life after high school. They formed a unique partnership with one of their long-time business associates, Chick-fil-A, asking the fast food restaurant to help train their students with disabilities. After some careful planning and collaboration between the school and the business owner, a new vocational training program was born.

The restaurant owner kicked off the program by sponsoring a luncheon at the school where students and teachers discussed career options. Managers from Chick-fil-A gave a short workshop on "What an Employer Looks For" in potential employees. The special education teacher followed up with parent meetings where she discussed how to set reachable goals for students, how to prepare a resume, and how to conduct mock interviews.

Teachers then gave a group of students in the special education program the opportunity to participate in a work/study experience at Chick-fil-A. Students from the school's gifted program partnered with the students in special education to guide them through their training. All of the students met regularly with mentors from the restaurant. "The mentor provides each student with job awareness skills needed to complete the assigned tasks and rewards the

accomplishments of the student with progress evaluations and snacks," said a school spokesperson. Students are paid in meals.

A job coach from the high school also is on site to guide student workers, monitor their progress and help out in case of emergencies.

The results are tangible. At least one student has been hired after graduation at the restaurant. Using the work experience as a reward, special education teachers have seen improvements in students' behaviors. As for business owners associated with the program, they are happy to have the help of dedicated employees.

"Chick-fil-A is so enthusiastic, so committed," said the spokesperson. "They love working with the kids."

The school used special needs and vocational training grants to cover the cost of implementing the program—\$600 last year. Tallwood hopes to expand its vocational training program by adding more work sites so that the school can better prepare its students with disabilities for life after school.

*Susan A. Motley
Partnership Coordinator
(757) 648-5700, ext. 78765
samotley@vbschools.com*