

GUEST OPINION

District has several ways to help West Bend students prepare for life after school

By Jen Wimmer

At a recent event, I noticed confused looks from community members when I said the West Bend School District serves children from ages 3 to 21. Many realized that children with disabilities may start school at an earlier age, but they might not have realized what programming is available as an extension of high school. As a public school district, we have the opportunity to meet the needs of young people with disabilities by offering programs to assist them in mastering both life and job skills.

The West Bend School District mission of preparing all students for college readiness and career success captures a wide variety of ways in which students can gain knowledge and skills for their life beyond high school. For young people with disabilities, we have specific programs as part of special education services that guide work and soft skill development. Some of these continue until they are 21 years old.

Personal development programs and services combine interpersonal communication and psychology to improve students' relationships with others and themselves. Students gain assistance with understanding their disability and on advocating for themselves and their needs with employers and colleges. Career development courses that include development of social skills and appropriate behavior in the workplace, filling out job applications, resumes, and interview preparation are designed for students with specific disabilities and/or other



Wimmer

health impairment. These classes focus equally on the academic preparation for maintaining employment as well as the hands-on training.

The Working to develop Ownership, Responsibility, Knowledge, and Skills (WORKS) program is a three-phase series of work experiences that help meet the needs of youths who want to develop basic entry-level work skills, behaviors, and attitudes. In Phase I, students work at West Bend School District sites and perform work tasks under the direct supervision of a job coach. Specific duties and experiences are varied to expose students to a wide variety of work, such as clerical, custodial, computer, lawn maintenance, woodworking, and food service.

Once students demonstrate the potential for success in the community, they move to Phase II. In Phase II, students work at a predetermined community work site. Current and past business partners include Pick 'n Save North and South, Samaritan Health Center, St. Vincent de Paul, Green Tree School, Fair Park School, and Lammscapes Landscaping. Students enter Phase III of the WORKS program when they have demonstrated success at the previous two levels. They acquire a paid position in the community either on their own or with the assistance of school staff or outside agencies.

Project SEARCH helps young people in Washington County over age 18

with significant intellectual disabilities by giving them self confidence-boosting job skills. Importantly, this program and the wonderful young people within it can also have positive effects on attitudes among employers about hiring people with disabilities and the range of jobs in which they can be successful. This national program is a local partnership between the West Bend School District, The Threshold, and business host West Bend Mutual Insurance.

The Project SEARCH model involves an extensive period of skills training and career exploration, long-term job coaching, and continuous feedback from teachers, skills trainers, and employers. Each student completes an internship at West Bend Mutual while also participating in a class on work skills. As a result, at the completion of the training program, the students are employed in nontraditional, complex, and rewarding jobs. Currently, all of the 2020 interns are employed in the community. Other local employers like Delta Defense and the West Bend School District have partnered with the program as well.

The West Bend School District is proud to have a robust program to meet the needs of the entire continuum of learners present in our communities. These varied programs and services are delivered by an exceptional team of West Bend School District professionals in partnership with students, families, and our communities.

(Jen Wimmer is superintendent of the West Bend School District.)