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Java Biz: A Proven School-Based Business Model

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Abstract

Students with disabilities often have a difficult time obtaining and maintaining employment. Many of today's school systems implement programs to assist students with disabilities to build the necessary skills they need to be successful after graduation. Courses in daily living skills, interpersonal skills, and occupational skills are common. An area that seems to be growing is school based work experience programs. By reviewing data kept at the school level of various demographics, this article will discuss in detail a proven school based business model that goes well beyond customer service. Students in the work experience program not only improved social skills, but their academic skills, communication skills, and technology skills also showed much advancement.

Keywords: Special education – Inclusion - Work experience

One of the major goals of the American educational system is to prepare students for life after graduation. Whether it is preparing them for life at a university, working part-time while taking classes at a community college, or allowing them to jump directly into the work force, school is a stepping stone guiding young adults to become productive members of society. Students with disabilities are often at a disadvantage lacking the necessary skills to maintain employment. Recognizing this, “schools have been called upon to better equip youth with disabilities the skills, opportunities, and linkages needed to assume meaningful careers. The Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) clearly articulates this commitment to students with disabilities by stating that an overarching purpose of special education is to ‘prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living’(20 U.S.C. § 1400 (33) (c) (1)” (Carter, E., Ditchmag, N., Owens, L., Swedeen, B., Trainor, A., Ye Sun, A., 2009). While many school systems have courses that address these needs, there has been a recent push to include more hands on experiences for students with disabilities. School based work experience models are becoming more common place while other systems have implemented community based instruction and supported employment. During the early stages of developing school-based models, work is often task-oriented and not highly motivating to the students. School jobs such as custodial work, assisting in the cafeteria, or doing “odd jobs” around school are often used. The following is a detailed description of a school-based business run by students with disabilities that generates profits and gives the students a sense of accomplishment.

Coffee has become a fast growing competitive market in American society. Even companies such as McDonald’s have recognized the new coffee craze and offer gourmet coffee drinks. Schools can take advantage by creating a coffee shop within the school setting. At first glance this program may seem to be a simple yet practical approach, allowing students with disabilities to work on social skills while providing a service to the school community.

When one begins to consider the banking involved, inventory systems to track sales and ordering, invoices, and deliveries can you truly appreciate the detail of the business model and how much the students benefit from the program over time. At the conclusion of the article is a recount of a true life story that shows the direct benefits of the program. The following paragraphs will discuss the essential components to building a successful model in a secondary school setting.

Theoretical Framework

Research strongly supports the need for quality work experience programs to assist students while they transition to adulthood. Even though the research is clear there is still a significant gap that must be filled. The unemployment rate for adults with disabilities is approximately 70% on a national level. Data also reveals that the majority of students with disabilities who leave special education programs each year have little or no competitive work experience (Donovan, 1998). The challenge for educators is creating programs that satisfy what the research suggests. Work experience is one of the largest predictors of job success for students with disabilities and an essential element in transition programs that can give students the necessary skills to increase opportunities for future employment (Carter, Ditchman, Sun, Trainor, Swedeen, & Owens, 2010). Furthermore, researchers have emphasized the importance of educating our youth to acquire quality work experiences during high school which would focus on the necessary skills and connections needed to enter the workforce (Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002). Numerous studies have emphasized the importance of effective transition programs in ensuring positive employment outcomes. For instance, Harvey (2002) found that individuals with disabilities who participated in vocational education while in high school earned higher incomes than students with disabilities who did not participate in vocational education. It is easy to see a reoccurring

theme in the research supporting work experience and the link to success after graduation. Another significant point backed by research is the benefit students with disabilities receive when they interact and participate with peers who do not have disabilities (Schleien, Tipton, and Green, 1997). Operating a school based business addresses all of the issues described above. There are many programs that create mock situations in order to simulate the world of work. The program discussed in this article is a proven business model that has been adapted to ensure that students are getting quality work experience that is easily transferred into future employment. First, the students are handling real money on a daily basis. They are responsible for inventory counts and entering the information in record keeping spreadsheets. Eventually, they learn to read invoices and order forms. Most importantly, the students interact with non-disabled peers, general education teachers, administrators, and parents of whom they would never come into contact with, under normal circumstances. The self-confidence displayed by the students in a short period of time is remarkable. Dressing for success, personal hygiene, proper introductions, arrival time, body language, and knowledge of the company or business are other important factors addressed by successful programs (Boen, Brown, & Roessler, 1994). The repetitive theme in the research is addressed thoroughly, as well as underlying themes that clearly benefit the students and their marketability after graduation.

Methods/Procedures

There are several factors that need to be considered before you can begin. The first step is to share the vision with administration. Once on-board, administration can help you solve problems such as physical location, initial funding, and student scheduling. There is no program without administrative support. The next obstacle to consider is your location. Out of site is truly out of mind. The gourmet coffee has a wonderful smell as it brews so make sure you are in a high traffic area so your potential customers can see and smell you. Storage is

another area that can easily be overlooked. You need a safe place to store your products and a place from which to operate. Since there are upfront costs to running the business, peace of mind regarding the safety of your inventory when you are not around is important. The storage space also needs to be convenient to the location you will operate from. You must be able to reload your inventory during operation hours. It also helps in making your set-up and break-down more efficient. Do not forget, this program is designed to benefit the students by teaching them every aspect of running a real business. Make sure you allot time for the students to set-up and break-down every day. Some teachers feel the need to begin setting up prior to the students entering the school in order to fit in a few extra sales. While the extra money is nice it is not the primary purpose of the program. Even if the program breaks even (which it won't) it is successful. Another consideration is the school, local and state regulations you must adhere to. One such regulation is the law that states there can be no competition with the school's cafeteria when it is open to students. If your school's cafeteria is open for breakfast you may sell to teachers but selling to students is off limits. Hopefully your administrative team will allow some sort of student pass system so you can utilize students as customers once the cafeteria closes, usually after the first tardy bell has rung for the day. One final note, this is a yearlong process. The goal should be to have the students running the entire business by year's end. From ordering to sales to deposits and beyond, the students should be running the show.

Now that you have support from the principal, your location and storage have been secured and you understand the limitations due to school and state rules you are ready to begin setting up the operation. The next phase is choosing products and obtaining the necessary equipment for your particular set-up. When choosing your inventory, start small. You can add products and services over time. The flexibility of the program allows you to grow at your own pace and comfort level. Programs exist that strictly sell coffee while others

sell coffee, bake cookies, and can deliver it right to your classroom once you have used the online ordering system. If possible select a vendor that will not only provide the product desired, but deliver and provide the necessary equipment as well. Avoid purchasing your sales items from grocery stores or wholesale clubs. It may be cost effective but remember we are not focused on profits. The goal is to give the students as many skills as possible that they can take with them into the work force. Learning how to check invoices and communicate with delivery personnel is a skill that can't be learned standing in a checkout line. Vendors often provide equipment. Search to find a coffee company that will loan you the proper machines to brew their coffee and a food vendor that will supply you with an oven to bake cookies or toast bagels. Finding vendors who provide this service will significantly reduce your start-up costs. It is also important to make sure your vendor provides you with the necessary materials to sell the items. Cups, creamers, napkins and stir straws are as important as the coffee itself. It is not necessary to begin but getting a working cash register as soon as possible is vital. Cash registers make tracking sales a breeze, while providing a valuable skill to the students. For approximately \$300 you can get a hi-tech machine that allows you to program departments, keep track of individual items sold, and is used in many small businesses giving the students valuable experience using real equipment. It is impossible to discuss items such as inventory and equipment and not bring up initial funding. The key term in the previous sentence is, "initial", as sales will generate the necessary funds to keep the business running. Many schools have discretionary funds that can help with start-up costs. Especially if you can show that the money can be replaced through daily sales. Many school systems have grant money available for new innovative programs that directly affect the students. There is usually a simple application process. Research your division to see if such funds are available and plan accordingly. The grant money may also be a factor as to when you begin operating. Another avenue may be to seek assistance from the community. Find a business that will sponsor your

upfront costs. Just as you shared your vision with the principal, share the vision with local businesses to see what they can donate to help get you started.

Benefits to Students with Disabilities

This portion of the article describes the true reason this program is so valuable to students with disabilities. It discusses the systems that enable the students to operate the business with little to no assistance over time. The entire program uses a counting and data entry format that can be learned by students with a wide range of cognitive abilities. The repetition of the procedures on a daily basis give students who usually struggle with retention the opportunity to practice and re-practice until it becomes second nature. Children who once struggled with money skills are now comfortable operating a cash register taking cash and making change. There are three distinct areas of the business and several systems that are imbedded in those areas. The three areas consist of opening, operating and closing procedures. The systems include inventory, banking, and ordering. Specific jobs with specific duties need to be created for each phase of the business. For instance, the cashier is responsible for counting the beginning bank in the cash register prior to opening for the day. During the operation, the cashier is responsible for ringing up customers and giving correct change quickly and accurately. The cashier's closing responsibilities consist of running the proper reports, separating sales from the bank, and entering the correct data into a spreadsheet that tracks the sales and inventory to make sure the daily operations were accurate. Examples of specific jobs are: cashier, coffee maker, runner, customer service/counter. Each person should have specific opening, operating and closing duties. The flexibility of the model allows you to create new positions, such as a baker or delivery person, but it is essential to remember the children are responsible for all three phases of the day. It is not the responsibility of the

teacher to set up or break down. Helping students to realize the importance of all aspects of a job will help them to transition successfully into the work force.

Most of the money produced BY the coffee shop goes into buying materials and merchandise FOR the coffee shop. However, with the profit that we DO make, we reward our employees with field trips to different restaurants and businesses. Our students are able to see how these businesses are run and can compare their daily operations and inventory system to our own.

Three Phases of a Successful Business

The following portion of the article will give key concepts for each of the three phases of the business. Of course we will begin with the opening procedures. The first rule to follow is giving each “job” a specific set of opening duties. Avoid giving specific duties to students. To clarify this, the cashier is responsible for making sure the register has the correct amount of change to begin the day. Giving this responsibility to a specific student will cause problems later if a student is absent or one student prefers what another student has been assigned. Attaching the responsibilities to each position allows students to rotate through each job, eventually learning the procedures for the entire business. Now if a student is absent it is easy to adjust because all students are familiar with each phase of the operation. It’s also not a bad idea to teach students to call in if they know they are going to be out. Calling in sick is a real life skill. When setting up the opening duties anticipate which jobs will finish more quickly than others and instruct them to automatically begin assisting others. This will avoid students standing around while others hurry to finish and create a more efficient beginning to the day.

First Day Duties

Before students can open their business for the day, they need to follow a short list of necessary duties which will enable a successful opening before the first customer is served.

Counting the register for correct change (\$50 consisting of \$5's \$1's and \$.25's is recommended)

Brewing coffee and heating water

Counting inventory

Setting up tables / displays

Setting up sale items and other necessary materials (ex. Cups, creamers, sugar/sweetener, stir straws)

One of the largest mistakes you can make is trying to begin sales before all opening duties have been taken care of. Once you have established a time to open make sure you are ready at that time. If you need more time, especially in the beginning, take it. Your customers will appreciate focused service that begins a little later over poor service because you're not ready. The next phase of the game is operating. Make sure each person understands what they are responsible for. This is where the students will begin to shine. Keeping the coffee hot and available, keeping the cream and sugar stocked and ready to go, making sure the area where customers are served is neat and clean are all extremely important. The key to customer service is making the customer feel important and appreciated. A clean counter with plenty of cream and sugar conveys that you care about their experience. It is also important to be prompt. If someone needs something don't waste time. Be pleasant and hurry. This lets them know that you understand their time is valuable. Be sure to create side duties during slower times. As with any business you will have periods of high traffic vs. down time. This is a great time to re-stock or possibly prepare an upcoming order. The final stage of the day deals with closing procedures. Just as you should not begin sales while you are trying to open you should not continue sales when it's time to close. Ringing up a customer after closing can throw off cash in the drawer and inventory counts. Customers will quickly learn to appreciate your operating hours and will not mind being turned away. That being said, NEVER close

early if you can help it. If someone has rushed to beat the clock, they need to be cared for.

Here is a short list of duties that should be adhered to:

Cleaning all equipment and areas

Re-counting inventory

Re-stocking storage shelves

Completing any prep for the next day

Closing the register by; counting sales and separating it from the change bank

Entering your sales and inventory counts into a spreadsheet to check for the day's accuracy

Technology Integration

With technology it is easy to create user friendly spreadsheets that are easily operated and extremely accurate. Through a simple data entry system you can keep daily track of inventory, sales, and cash. Ordering can also be fast and easy and 100% completed by the students. When completing your daily spreadsheets you will find discrepancies. This is a good thing. Go over them with your students. Let them tell you why the counts were off. Did someone spill a cup that needed to be thrown away? Was a muffin wrapper torn in the box and needed to be discarded? The students will quickly learn the accuracy of the program and appreciate solving the little problems that pop up on the spreadsheet. It can be an enjoyable experience for a teacher to manipulate the system and watch the students troubleshoot and figure out why there is a missing cup or an extra dollar. It's when they don't catch something that you have to worry!

Running a school based business can be extremely enjoyable for the entire school community. Students with Disabilities will blossom. The interaction with staff and non-disabled peers is priceless. Most importantly they will be learning real life skills they can take

with them to the work force. Here is the story previously mentioned that shows the real potential of such a program.

Results

Examples of Successful Model

Low Socio-Economic Status

Year	Expenses	Earned	Profit
Year 1	\$1400	\$2539	\$1139
Year 2	\$4199	\$4465	\$266
Year 3	\$2144	\$3331	\$1187
Year 4	\$3954	\$3241	<\$713>

Middle Socio-Economic Status

Year	Expenses	Earned	Profit
Year 1	\$8614	\$9097	\$1041
Year 2	\$12806	\$12227	\$2530
Year 3	\$17748	\$17339	<\$129>
Year 4	\$14274	\$16563	\$2444

High Socio-Economic Status

Year	Expenses	Earned	Profit
Year 1	NA	NA	NA
Year 2	\$40580	\$51555	\$10975
Year 3	\$47694	\$54867	\$7172
Year 4	\$38956	\$50747	\$11791

Success Story

After working for an entire school year in a school-based coffee shop, a self-contained student had the confidence to apply for a summer job in an ice cream shop. With only two weeks on the job the manager came in one day frustrated that his shift manager had called in sick with no warning. He made the comment “I can’t be up here and in the back at the same time. I need to complete the inventory and prepare an order.”

The student quickly responded. “I’ll do it!”

“Do what?”

“I’ll complete the inventory. I used to do it all the time at my school’s coffee shop.”

The manager had nothing to lose, so he handed him the clipboard. The student returned a short time later. During closing the manager went back thinking it was going to be a long night because he would have to complete the inventory and prepare the next day’s order. To his surprise not only was the inventory accurate but the suggestions for the order was very accurate. The student received a raise and a promotion on the spot.

Conclusion

The program has so much to offer. It addresses least restrictive environment, money skills, technology, workplace readiness, and the list goes on. The beauty is in its flexibility. Business classes can assist with marketing. Art can assist with logos and signage. Shop classes can build storage shelves. It is the hopes of the authors that readers will see the value of such programs and begin exploring how they can introduce it into their school buildings.

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