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THE INITIATOR

MARCH 2008

Ready for LIFE: Preparing High School Students for Transition

Most students leave high school with a diploma. But for the past nine years, students enrolled in Learning Independence From Experience (LIFE) classes have been graduating with even more.

Jointly managed by Disability Network, Traverse Bay Intermediate School District, and Michigan Rehab Services, LIFE classes are offered to high school students with disabilities in the five county area.

Annie Campbell, Transition Specialist with Disability Network, leads LIFE 101, geared toward 9th and 10th graders. "I go into their classroom once or twice per month," she explains. "We talk about self-esteem, work on leadership skills, and do hands-on team building activities."

Another key component of the program is disability awareness. "A lot of students don't know much about their disability," says Campbell. "Each student in LIFE does a research project based on his or her disability and presents it to the class. We make it okay to talk about disability, instead of avoiding the subject."

LIFE 101 also introduces career exploration. Campbell says, "We discuss strengths, weaknesses, and interests. Then we try to help students discover realistic job opportunities that might fit those strengths and interests."

After sophomore year, students head to LIFE 102, led by Transition Specialist Jessie Bachmann. "I go into the

classroom once a week," says Bachmann. "We work on team building, problem solving, and self-advocacy. We also take the students on field trips to give them hands-on experience with independent living skills."

To prepare for living on their own, students are taught how to manage money and create budgets. Each student in LIFE 102 receives \$100 to open a bank account at the beginning of the year. They learn how to build a relationship with a bank, use a debit card, comparison shop, and budget their money through the end of the year. Bachmann explains, "The money is for needs only and can be spent only during class time. It's a great way to teach them how quickly things like shampoo and deodorant add up."

As graduation nears, instructors prepare students by helping them identify their interests, fill in sample job applications, and conduct mock interviews. Students are also given the opportunity to try job shadowing if they choose. According to Bellaire High School Special Education instructor Marcia Lewandowski, "The LIFE program covers much-needed career skills and gives students a better understanding about how to plan for the future."

Students also learn how to rent an apartment, practicing everything from looking through the ads to reading leases, and understanding rights and responsibilities. Some years, students even pool funds to rent a house where they can hold classes and learn home maintenance skills.



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In addition to building self-esteem, LIFE classes also cover self-advocacy, a skill that comes in handy during the state-required Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. "We want students to understand that it shouldn't just be adults around the table talking," says Bachmann. "The students should be the ones choosing their goals, speaking up, and advocating for themselves."

To ensure that schools make the most of their instructional time, Bachmann and Campbell also provide support to teachers in the LIFE program. "We show them how to integrate independent living skills into their everyday activities," says Bachmann. "The goal is for students to prepare for transition even when we're not there. We see a lot of success stories, and we know the program does make difference."