



Best Practices Case Study

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Editor's note: The Confidence in Kansas Public Education Task Force sponsors the Friends of Education Awards. This case study provides information about a 2009 Friends of Education nominee.

Walgreens works with Topeka Public Schools

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On a recent trip to Walgreens, I was greeted with a friendly smile from the young cashier. I often go to Walgreens to pick up a prescription or other items. What I never knew until recently is that the cashier I see so often is one of many Topeka Public Schools special education students employed by the company.

Eight Topeka Walgreens stores have been in a work experience partnership since 2006. An agreement established in 2006 makes it possible for secondary special education students to be placed in one of the eight stores with a job coach. Their time at work includes cleaning, stocking shelves, checking for outdated products, and even working at the cash register. What is most remarkable about this program is that the students performing these tasks would have a difficult time learning these skills were it not for this opportunity. The students' exceptionalities are varied—from learning disabilities to autism, to mental retardation, attention deficit disorder, vision and cerebral palsy. No student has been turned away.

The program launched in 2006 with one store participating. By the end of the 2006-07 school year, two more stores agreed to take part in the program. By the end of 2007-08, all eight local store managers agreed to have students work in their stores. In almost three years, 40 students have been trained in a variety of retail skills. More than half of those students have either gotten full time or part time jobs as Walgreens employees upon graduation or have been admitted in the Vocational Intervention Program (VIP) as paid employees in preparation for post-high school training or employment.

What the Walgreens partnership provides is well above what is usually expected of a business partnership. Students have many different learning styles. Some can learn a lot in the classroom, but many need hands-on experiences to learn. When working at a Walgreens location, students experience a learning environment that cannot be replicated in a school building. The students practice work skills, and wear a Walgreens uniform. They develop a sense of pride and show a great boost to their self-esteem. The store staffs express enthusiasm for the students and enjoy the energy they bring to the business. The partnership with Topeka Public Schools has become a model for other communities who are interested in establishing a similar work experience program.

The local stores have met with TPS staff to determine the best approach to use with each student and what kinds of job tasks would be appropriate to each student's strengths and ability. The work experience requires a lot of planning on the part of the Walgreens management. They have embraced it and assign schedules and work responsibilities to address the positive attributes each student has to offer.

TPS Employer Recruiter Herman Bringle notes, "The Walgreens commitment to TPS students is especially significant for two reasons. First, retail sales, with its wide range of skill acquisition

opportunities, is a very difficult employment area in which to get students exposure. Second, the variety of environments in which we have been able to immerse our students has become invaluable. The care and support given our students by the Walgreens staff has far exceeded our hopes and expectations. I cannot fathom how eight very different groups of people, unrelated other than by employer, could provide such a uniformly positive experience for so diverse a group of special needs students."

In April, 2007, the original three store managers, and the first young man who had been in on the groundwork for the Walgreens and Topeka Public Schools partnership, were awarded the Career Development Award from The Topeka Youth Project. In addition, the managers were recognized in the Walgreens' *Applause* magazine for their work in this partnership. These acknowledgements recognize that the partnership between Walgreens and Topeka Public Schools is an integral part of the educational experience for our students, and continues to be recognized as an important part of school curriculum and future life experiences.

TPS Job Coach Betty Patton says, "Walgreens has placed students in the work force who would have probably never had the opportunity without participation in the work experience program." Student worker William Gray is excited about what he has learned. "Working at Walgreens is cool. I learned that working at a job is hard work," he said. "I learned how to work with people." Student James Enriquez says, "Walgreens has been a wonderful experience for me. It is helping me see that you need a job to make it."

The corporate philosophy is one of inclusion. Randy Lewis is the senior vice president of distribution and logistics. His son is autistic and he has seen first hand how important work experience programs can be for special education students. He was instrumental in the planning of a large Walgreens distribution center in South Carolina where technology was put in place which would allow persons with disabilities to work there. "They're invisible to most employers," says Randy. "A lot of them have given up trying to get a job because they don't have access. I believe we need to take advantage of their gifts. They can do the job as well as a person with typical abilities."

The brother and guardian of one student who has Asperger's Syndrome is grateful for what Walgreens has done for his brother. "During the time John has been with Walgreens, his communication skills have increased greatly. Walgreens has been a great launching pad for getting John ready for the rest of his life." A mother who has had three children participate in the work experience is extremely thankful. "I am grateful to Walgreens for employing three of my children. I would like to express my thanks."

Margaret Ballantyne, TPS vocational counselor, says, "Walgreens has been an irreplaceable asset in helping Topeka Public Schools as we prepare our students for their eventual assimilation into the community and work force. They are a model for community involvement in local education."

When you consider other partnerships who give money or time, don't forget that this program is unique. There are hosts of programs in communities across the country to support schools either monetarily or through volunteer efforts. The difference with this partnership is the population it serves—a population that is a bit more challenging than others. Teacher George Smirl explains it this way, "TPS is indebted to the Walgreens constellation of people. We thank them for their cooperation and for caring so profoundly for the young people many have forgotten."

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