

# CCSD Newsmakers

## **PACE helps special education students live independently after graduation**

**By Dave Sheehan, CCSD Communications**

Brad Keating believes many people don't know what happens to special education students after they complete high school. Where do they go? What do they do? Keating knows the answers, because he runs a post-secondary program for students with disabilities at West Career and Technical Academy (WCTA).

The Program Approach to Career Employment (PACE) is a federally-funded, post-secondary transition program for students with disabilities who have completed at least four years of high school, have obtained an adjusted diploma and want to find employment. They are chosen for the program through an IEP team meeting. The parents, students, transition specialists and current teacher of record explore options to determine the best program for the student.

As a special education teacher at WCTA, Keating started the school's PACE program in 2011. It is one of five such programs in the Clark County School District (CCSD), and all five are operated at career and technical academies. Keating has the passion and credentials for his job. A 2004 graduate of Coronado High School, he earned his bachelor's degree and an MBA at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and then obtained master's degrees in special education and educational leadership. After working in other fields, Keating became an educator when he joined WCTA in a special education co-teaching position.



- About 55 students are being served at the five PACE locations. Participants must be 18-22 years old. Keating is working with eight students. Two of them are Richard and Chris, both of whom went through the program and landed jobs with CCSD during the summer of 2013. They worked in the Administrative Center at 5100 W. Sahara Avenue. Richard worked on computers and Chris helped out in the Grants Development Department. Keating said, "Chris moved onto a high level program called Project Search, an intensive year-long program in which he works at UMC on a daily basis and does nine-week rotations in different departments, with the goal that he will gain full employment at the program's end."

Keating has high hopes for both Chris and Richard, both of whom continue to be active in the PACE program. He describes both men as motivated and anxious to work. "It's all about transitioning these students so they are ready for real world employment."

Richard said, "The PACE Program helped me to get ready for a real job. I have a lot of fun every single day and was able to get a job this summer and saying, "It opened the way for Richard to obtain 'real life' jobs in custodial, culinary, horticulture and computer training. For the first time in Richard's life, he was so proud to earn his own paycheck like everybody else."

PACE is fortunate to have outstanding support from the community. McCarran International Airport, UNLV, Opportunity Village, Goodwill and Nellis Air Force Base are among the entities that have hired PACE students. Keating says the Regional Transportation Commission will join that list in January, with students working in different departments such as information technology, bus transit and building maintenance.

"In most cases," said Keating, "when a position opens up, our students are given a very fair look because they have done the job and have already proven themselves." When they are not working off campus, PACE students are at school from 8:30 to 1:30 each day. The classes go far beyond work skills. "We are teaching them basic work skills,

independent living skills and work skills. We want them to be able to live independently, or maybe if they are in a group home, to be able to function independently.” He added, “These students are looking for a chance and an opportunity. Maybe nobody has believed in them in the past, or perhaps some people have discounted them because of their disability. But when we do give them an opportunity, they truly shine. They simply want to be treated like everyone else, and they want to be able to prove themselves and be able to work just like anyone else.”

Like other successful CCSD programs, PACE works because it is a team effort. Parents play an especially important part. Keating said, “This program is only as successful as the students and parents allow. We are in contact with parents on a weekly basis. We invite them to school and they take part in many different activities and events. We would not be successful without the parents’ support.”

Keating’s enthusiasm for his job is unmistakable. “This is the most satisfying, the most rewarding job I’ve ever had, and the students make it a joy every single day.” CCSD Deputy Superintendent Kim Wooden said, “CCSD is proud of the work of the staff in the PACE programs around the district. Through their efforts, students are able to acquire skills that will deeply impact their ability to live independently through valuable work experiences.”

That enthusiasm is shared by Kristine Minnich, assistant superintendent of the Student Support Services Division: “Considering that CCSD is the second largest employer in Nevada, PACE provides our students a plethora of skills and experiences that will assist them in obtaining gainful employment and, ultimately, better equip them as contributing members of our community.” Minnich added, “We have helped build awareness that individuals with disabilities have valuable skills and far too often are an untapped resource.”

So, what’s ahead for PACE? Keating says a new curriculum will be rolled out next year. It will be based on national standards that are aligned with career and technical education. He also expects the program to expand beyond the CTAs to comprehensive schools in CCSD. Keating says he will continue to establish new partnerships with businesses and other organizations in order to find new employment opportunities for PACE students. “These are people who can become productive, self-sufficient members of society.”