

MAKING WAVES AT DCS



Brewing Independence

Helping students gain skills for the workplace and beyond

The delicious aroma of coffee permeates the air in the Resource Room at Dexter High School as students brew and serve hot cups of coffee, cocoa, and tea to DHS staff as part of the Brewing Independence initiative.

Inspired by Bitty and Beau's Coffee Shop (a company creating a path for people with disabilities to become more valued, accepted, and included in every community), special education teacher Megan LaBarre envisioned implementing a similar program at DHS. Now eight current DHS students spend a portion of their school day taking orders and serving hot drinks to staff, learning valuable work skills while building stronger connections with the greater high school community.



Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Brewing Independence was a small program with no steady operational funding; LaBarre absorbed the costs herself to get the program off the ground, purchasing supplies and a used Keurig machine. When the pandemic hit, the program was shelved until this year when special education teacher Molly Visel was inspired to continue the initiative. Visel applied for and was awarded a grant from the Educational Foundation of Dexter (EFD), which allowed her to purchase another Keurig and additional supplies. In recognition of their generous funding, Visel incorporated the EFD acronym into their newly-created logo designed by DHS GraphX students.

The goal of Brewing Independence is written right into the name: to help students build independence while learning important social, academic, financial and vocational skills to navigate the adult world after graduation. Students take orders, deliver coffee and tea around the building, take cash and make change, while practicing social skills such as eye contact and saying "you're welcome" after being thanked.

Brewing Independence is just one aspect of the vocational education high-needs students receive at DHS; helping Food and Nutrition staff in the cafeteria also allows students to improve their job skills. Between these two opportunities, students learn how to handle fluctuations in a work schedule, both when things get busy and how to fill their time when it's not so busy. Other job-related topics such as learning how to read a paycheck, paying taxes, and preparing a resume, are also covered in vocational education. Visel uses the book, "Smile and Succeed for Teens" by Kirt Manecke to help teach face-to-face communication and people skills.

This past Valentine's Day, students delivered treats from Food and Nutrition to DHS staff along with a brand-new flyer featuring a QR code ordering form. This, in addition to a weekly Google Form email, has increased business and students' opportunity to connect with the rest of the school. Starting this March, students began using a cart for deliveries, and will soon sport aprons featuring the Brewing Independence logo (screen-printed by GraphX) to increase the business-like atmosphere of the program. The program has also moved to a 'cash-only' basis in order for students to practice making change.

Students are excited about being part of this initiative, and feel they are making a difference by providing a service to their school. The money received is reinvested back in to program in hopes it will continue to build and become self-sustainable. At some point, Visel hopes the program can grow to include selling hot drinks to DHS students, increasing student interactions and connections throughout the building.

NOTE: On March 18th, Brewing Independence students served their 100th cup of coffee! DHS GraphX teacher Dennis Stockwell was the lucky recipient, receiving candy and a Dexter Bakery apple fritter as a token of students' appreciation.

