

Editorial: Tech school's CVS store an Rx for biz success



Greater Lowell Technical High School alumnus Jon DaSilva created the CVS Workforce Innovation and Talent Center initiative as a way to give back to the community. (Photo Courtesy CVS Health)

By [EDITORIAL](#) |

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With state employers struggling to find workers with the appropriate skills, the need — and value — of a vocational-technical education has never been in more demand.

A learning environment that combines academics with real-world experience equips students with a practical background not available in traditional high schools.

A unique program offered at Greater Lowell Technical High School exemplifies the advantages of a work-based curriculum. The Tyngsboro-based school became the home of retail pharmacy giant CVS' first Workforce Innovation and Talent Center. That's thanks to the efforts of Greater Lowell Tech alumnus Jon DaSilva, who grew up in Lowell's Pawtucketville neighborhood.

After graduating in 2002, DaSilva went on to manage CVS stores in Tewksbury, Chelmsford and downtown Lowell.

But he found his true calling when he became a member of the company's Workforce Initiative.

“When I took this role about eight years ago, I was very passionate on creating pathways for youths,” DaSilva, a senior workforce manager for CVS New England, told the newspaper.

The program operates on the model of a traditional co-op, with students spending one week in class and then spending another week working in the field.

For Greater Lowell Tech students, the “field” is an actual CVS store built on the school grounds.

During the course of a school year, the student-run store usually makes about \$5,000; that money goes toward a college scholarship for a Greater Lowell Tech student who works for CVS.

“The students stock it, they order their own inventory, and then at the end of it, everything they sell (generates funds for a) scholarship. So, we give it to the school as a donation at no cost,” DaSilva said.

This year, DaSilva said 50 students are eligible for that scholarship.

The program has been a difference maker for many students, but none more so than McKenzie Schiavone, who got involved at a pivotal moment in her life.

While she was still interviewing for the program in July 2016, she and her mother became homeless. A top-10 student with her entire senior year left, she was faced with not knowing where they would stay.

“I just didn’t want to give all that up because of the living situation I was in,” Schiavone said. “I got through and I’m very grateful for the partnership with the vocational school because I wouldn’t be where I am today without it.”

After graduating, Schiavone, now 22, went on to study at Simmons College in Boston. Because of CVS’s large footprint, she was able to continue working for the company while attending college.

Schiavone has worked her way up to a district performance coordinator with CVS; she credits her time with the company as giving her the stability she needed to be successful.

“I just want people to realize that they’re not at a dead end no matter what they’re going through, that there’s always going to be other options, and I’m super grateful for CVS,” Schiavone said.

While Greater Lowell Tech is where the initiative got its start, DaSilva said there are now 20 vocational schools across the state involved in the program, including Shawsheen Valley Technical High School in Billerica.

Forward-thinking, empowering programs like these are why so many students want to pursue a vocational-technical school education.

Unfortunately, the state's education establishment has failed to meet that need. Wait lists at several of our vocational-technical schools await hundreds of youngsters who'd prefer that path.

It's time we supply the appropriate number of voc-tech seats to meet the demand of prospective students — and employers.