

PEWAUKEE SCHOOL DISTRICT

The road to independence

Transition academy moves to WCTC, promotes more opportunities for young special-needs adults

By Lauren Anderson
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PEWAUKEE — For a group of young adults with special needs, moving two miles down the road made all the difference.

Students in the Pewaukee School District's transition academy used to spend their days at the high school while learning the critical life skills they will need in the transition to greater independence.

But there were limitations with the arrangement. Being in a community without public transportation, or even sidewalks, proved challeng-

ing in the effort to promote independence and job opportunities for students.

"When I came to the district three and a half years ago, the biggest challenge with a district without sidewalks or public transportation is, how do you empower kids to get from place to place after they age out of the program?" said Anthony Strancke, Pewaukee School District's director of student services.

"The program was strong and there were a lot of student-centered opportunities that promoted career and vocational training but the challenge is once they're



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Brennan Boehm (left) talks with Reginald Burton during class on Monday.



Ryan Steinmetz works on his laptop during class on Monday.

done, their parents would have to take them to a number of the places we had been taking them to reinforce their skills."

An effort to address that problem, the transition program, called Project L.I.F.E, moved this year a few minutes down the road to Waukesha County Technical College, which has given students newfound access to not only public transportation — and, by extension, a wider geographical range of job options — but also postsecondary educational opportunities.

Students praise the change in venue, saying it gives them more freedom and encourages them to take their education more seriously.

"They like being around

peers and that the atmosphere is one where they're always treated as an adult," teacher Jill Thomas said.

An example of that, Thomas said, is one of her students who prefers to carry a briefcase. That preference caused some problems at Pewaukee High School because school policy didn't allow it.

"But here, it's OK, no big deal," Thomas said. "A lot of things are just different here. The rules are more adult and there is more flexibility."

Student Jennifer Groves agreed.

"It's different being around younger kids versus being here," Groves said. "It's a different atmosphere."

"Here people are in a mindset that they have to get their work done," student

Noah Alliet added.

For Reginald Burton, it's the access to a whole new book selection that has him excited to be at WCTC.

"I like the library here; they have a lot of selective books that I can read," Burton said.

Some students have begun taking classes at both WCTC's Pewaukee and Waukesha campuses, an opportunity that wasn't available before this year.

Meanwhile, coordinators say the significance of learning the bus system can't be overstated. None of the students said they knew how to navigate the bus system before the program, but all said they can now ride confidently on their own.

"Often times, individuals that do not have a driver's

license or a means of transportation have to settle for jobs or positions that are limited," Strancke said. "Whereas having public transportation in a large community such as Waukesha opens up so many more opportunities for vocation and living."

Currently, six of Thomas's nine students are employed — a major step on their road to independence.

"If students leave here with permanent employment and they have a life plan and they're working toward their goals and their family understands the resources that are out there for them," Thomas said, "then I think we've gotten them in the right place."

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