

'THEY'RE BEING TRAINED TO GO TO LIFE'

South Bend Career Academy Provides New Options



South Bend Career Academy sophomore Stefan Lula explains to a local business representative about a proposal he and another student are presenting to the school board – to build a large-scale virtual reality environment at the school.

By Charlee Beasor

Doug Bernhard was so frustrated at the lack of basic skills and work ethic in the employees at his previous employer of 36 years that he decided to do something about it.

He went straight to the source and became a welding instructor at a new public charter school – the South Bend Career Academy (SBCA) – on the northwest edge of the city.

There he teaches welding (gas, arc, TIG and wire) to students in grades seven through 12. The goal is to have them certified in welding by the time they graduate so they are ready to go straight into the workforce (if that's the career path they choose).

"All the years that I was in manufacturing (structural steel and fabricating company), my job, I ran the place for 34 of the years, I couldn't find kids or young people coming out of college or high school that had any work ethics, could read a tape measure, simple things," Bernhard recalls. "They didn't want to show up to work on time. I want to teach kids how to be workers, come on time, do what you get paid to do. I want the people that hire our kids to say, 'Well, I want more from that place because they are sending out kids that know how to work and want to work.'"

Bernhard's story resonates with Bruce Daeger, human resources manager at automotive supplier Federal-Mogul.

"The No. 1 reason why employees lose jobs in America is absenteeism. The exciting thing about this school is that is a core value; you must be here," Daeger exclaims. "Also, what I recognize is that in a traditional school, they're training you to go to college. And here, they're being trained to go to life."

The business of education

There are some main differences between SBCA and traditional schools or vocational education. For one, it gives grades on character and work ethic, along with academic scores. There is also a major focus on punctuality and attendance.

Students attend from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

and for 190 school days (10 longer than traditional public schools). No 'D' grades are given – students are expected to have at least a 'C'-level mastery of a subject before moving on. There are no class bells; the responsibility is placed on students to get themselves to class on time.

The school was founded by two local businessmen, Larry Garatoni and Steve Hartz. Garatoni says he and his wife were looking for a way to give back to the community. Hartz, who runs a local manufacturing company, was struggling to find a suitable workforce, Garatoni says. The two merged their mutual interests and submitted a charter application to Ball State University.

The school opened in a renovated building in an industrial park in the fall of 2011 with about 120 students in grades seven through nine. Each year, additional grades have been added; there is now a small group of seniors at the school. The current enrollment is around 300 students.

"Education is a very complex business," notes Garatoni, also the school board president. "Obviously you're getting kids who have been somewhere else, and through the kids or the parents there's a motivation to come to the school – either a dissatisfaction or they weren't doing well where they were."

There were some behavioral issues at first, he admits. But building a culture of personal responsibility has gone a long way in curbing those problems.

"The culture we've tried to establish here, the kids are responsible for a lot of their learning. We're here to guide them, but we want to have a very adult-to-adult relationship. Our goal is to help these kids

become adults," Garatoni contends. "One of the precepts of the school is everyone treats everyone else with respect."

Sarah Fine, education manager of transition, explains that the SBCA is different from traditional career schools because the academic and career sides are under one umbrella.

"You'll see a lot of career centers that kids come to the building for a half day; our kids are here all day. We are intentional about helping kids to start thinking about their futures starting in seventh grade," she discloses. "They are kind of at the helm of what their future might unfold to be."

Students can graduate with up to a year and a half of college credits; are exposed to career opportunities in a variety of fields; shown the possibilities that exist in the military, Peace Corps and AmeriCorps; and are required to contribute a set number of hours of community service each year.

The students come from throughout the region and a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. There is about a 20% special needs population. Lead administrator Chad Addie (other schools would refer to his role as principal) says the staff doesn't buy into the concept of "at-risk" students.

"We look at kids as 'at-promise.' It's a very different approach. We're not looking at kids' weaknesses and deficits and where they fail; we're looking for where are their gifts, strengths, and what are their abilities and what can we build on together to do something special. There's no question in my mind that they're going to continue to unfold and amaze us," he states.

Hands-on experience

Shelbi Holt's anxiety disorder and medical issues were exacerbated by her traditional public school education. It got to the point that she stopped going and was homeschooled.

Today, the 16-year-old is flourishing at SBCA. She's contemplating a degree in the medical field. "I'm not sure what; I just want to help people," she offers.

"I started (at SBCA) this year, and my anxiety disorder has decreased and I've been off my medication for a while and it's so much better here. My scores and everything have gone up," Holt adds.

Similar stories can be found throughout the school. Sophomore Tamara Harris was bullied at her last school and has found a welcoming environment at SBCA. Chris Swartz, sophomore, explains that SBCA staff and students are very protective of one another.

"We're all pretty much one gigantic family," he says. "Everyone is here for one another, without a doubt."

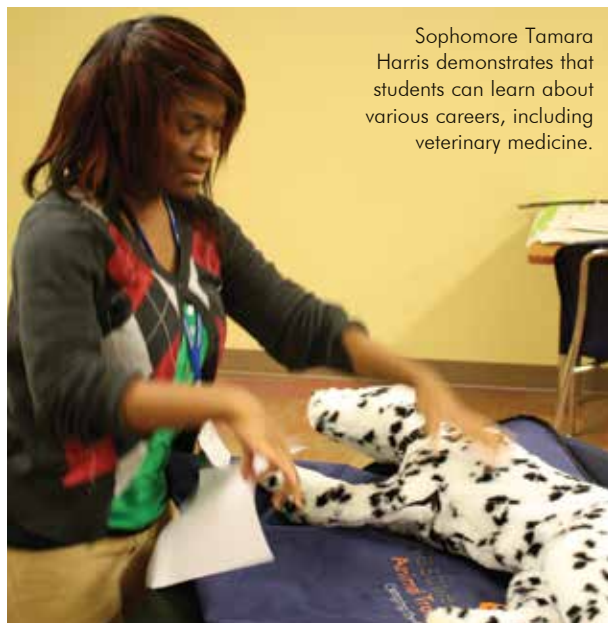
Stefan Lula wasn't doing well at his last school either (three of his siblings also attend the SBCA).

"I came here, and there was a completely different experience," he shares. "Teachers aren't barking at you to do things; they're inviting you to do things. They're inviting you to learn. I got the chance to take some really cool classes here that I wouldn't have taken anywhere else."

SBCA uses hands-on, project-based learning and Project Lead the Way (PLTW) curriculum, which focuses on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM).



Students at the free, public charter school get to experience hands-on learning in technology, engineering, medical sciences, business administration and more.



Sophomore Tamara Harris demonstrates that students can learn about various careers, including veterinary medicine.

JAG Indiana Breaks Down Education Barriers

High school isn't easy. It's even harder if a student has any number of challenging circumstances working against them, including poverty, a learning disability or previous behavioral problems.

The Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) program is designed to help students overcome those barriers to educational or career success. The program is open to juniors and seniors that are deemed "at-risk." It offers classroom instruction on how to be employable, provides opportunities to develop leadership skills, and connects students with opportunities to job shadow, have internships and mentorships, and other tactics to help students graduate high school.

Indiana launched its first JAG program in 2006 with 12 schools. Today there are 101 JAG sites, with over 9,000 students, in the state. There is a 91% graduation rate for the program. JAG-Indiana is overseen by the Indiana Department of Workforce Development (DWD).

"Together with students we identify issues that might hinder graduation or success after high school and address these with the student throughout the program," says Cindy Kicinski, assistant program manager for JAG-Indiana, in an email.

The JAG specialist teacher works with the community to develop job leads, arrange college visits and set up summer employment. Once the student is out of school, the JAG staff offers follow-up assistance for one year after graduation.

Students that have not graduated but are interested in completing a GED or the requirements for a diploma also have access to the JAG Out-of-School program. There are 12 such sites in Indiana with 149 current students.

The state budget allocated an additional \$6 million each year for two years, which will enable the program to add schools and serve over 4,000 students through the in-school model.

RESOURCE: JAG-Indiana at www.in.gov/dwd



Sophomore Chris Swartz points out a CNC machine, like those available in advanced manufacturing facilities around the state, that students are able to use.

During a tour of the school, Lula and other students demonstrated just a few of the things they are learning in Jason Gibbens' PLTW class. Students were working on their 20% time, in which anyone that completes their work throughout the week is rewarded with time on Fridays to explore and learn anything they want (modeled after a practice at Google, "If it's good enough for Google, it's good enough for SBCA," Gibbens chimes in).

Gibbens has created a version of a "fab lab" (a small-scale workshop modeled after something similar at Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and it includes a 3D printer, as well as CNC machines, similar to those used in machinist shops and manufacturing facilities.

"I can't tell you what the jobs are going to be next week, let alone when he (Lula) graduates in two years. I know manufacturing is going to be available; I know that design is going to be available. ... I don't ever want to teach them what to think. I want to teach them how to think. And if I teach them how to think, it doesn't matter what technology shows up," he contends.

Step right up, businesses

Businesses in the community have the opportunity to partner with SBCA and provide student tours, answer questions and help familiarize the young people with a variety of industries. Two partners are Federal-Mogul and heavy vehicle manufacturer AM General.

"The intention should be to prepare the student for the world, to go out and make their way," asserts Chuck Tabacchi, manager of commercial business development for AM General. "These kids here have the opportunity to go out right into the workforce, or college, but they're coming out with skill sets that the industry needs. I don't know that we're successful in our mainstream education system."

Daeger and Evan Stall, human resources representative at Federal-Mogul, teamed with the school early on; AM General is a more recent partner.

"We saw the potential for a pipeline of young people that have already been trained and their learning curve is shortened," Daeger offers. "We present this to them and we keep coming back so that they see this presence. They gain that recognition of Federal-Mogul, they've been through the operation and seen it, and they are excited for the future."

He notes that a benefit of partnering with the school is being able to break the negative stereotype of working in a manufacturing facility.

"They're fascinated because they've never seen anything like this. ... You walk through our operation and while you can't eat off the floor, it's not far from it," Daeger adds.

Making their business needs known to educators is going to be key, Tabacchi emphasizes.

Tamara Harris and sophomore Shelbi Holt recall their difficult traditional public school experiences. Both have found respite at SBCA. “You can tell there is respect for everyone here,” Holt affirms.



“If we can continuously drive industry and education ... kids coming out of school (are going to be) career-ready. If they decide to go to college, they’ve got college credits already in their favor,” he says.

Tabacchi remarks that companies aren’t going to move to Indiana if there isn’t a qualified workforce to be found close by and that SBCA could potentially help curb that problem. Daegre admits that working with the school won’t generate any quick returns.

“We don’t gain any immediate benefit, but this is an investment in our community. We’re just very excited that the academy is interested in working with us.”

Unconventional academics in a conventional world

As a public school, SBCA receives per pupil funding from the Indiana Department of Education. It is also supported by grants, fundraisers and community donations. Fine acknowledges that the academy is accountable to the Indiana Department of Education as well as its charter holder.

“If you look at where we are academically, we’re far from where we want to be, but yet, what they’re asking us to measure is all of what is going on. It’s qualitative outcomes. But we’re still accountable to that,” she recognizes. “The conference I just went to this past week was about how do you get kids to think outside the box. And if your tests don’t measure that, what are you really measuring? That’s the challenge we have.”

The school’s ISTEP results for 2013

show some improvement over the previous year’s scores; in 2012, just over 36% passed both the math and English sections of the test. In 2013, 41% passed both sections. The statewide average for 2013 ISTEP results was just over 73% of students passing.

“The true pictures aren’t really captured in full by the tools we use to measure at this point,” Fine maintains. “I think we’re doing bits and pieces of what (traditional education) is doing, but the difference is we’re trying to do it under one umbrella. It’s not an easy ride. It’s challenging. We have a learning curve; we’re exploring things that haven’t been done before.”

‘Fail harder’

The teachers at SBCA come from a variety of backgrounds – some are education professionals, some are industry or business veterans who were looking for a way to give back to the community.

Seventh grade math and technology teacher John Weldy worked for 12 years in information technology and tech support before finishing his education degree and coming to SBCA.

“The biggest thing that gives me hope for the future is people around here are not afraid to take risks, to fail harder. In education, we’re not used to failing, whereas in the real world, you cannot succeed until you have failed. You need to learn how to fail,” he outlines.

Last year Weldy and English teacher Dee Batchelor partnered (their classrooms are next to each other, with garage doors between them for cross-curricular learning) on a restaurant project. Students visited a local Golden

Corral and learned about ordering supplies, customer service and how to run a restaurant.

“That’s where the relevance comes in,” Batchelor says. “It’s important for the kids to find relevance but it’s important for us to provide relevant experiences.”

Weldy also uses some game-based education teaching methods, with the grading results more aligned with real-life situations.

“In the real world, your boss isn’t going to say, ‘You got a B on this.’ Either you did the job or you didn’t do the job. When they get (assignments) accepted, they don’t have these gaps, these holes in their knowledge,” he describes.

School nurse Tracy Smith had applied for her son Thomas to come to SBCA before she became an employee herself.

“What I was looking for was something different than traditional schools,” Smith outlines. “The environment and the faculty that are in this building are like nothing I’ve ever seen before. Every student is being met where they are and a path is being found for them to get them where they’re going. ... And I was not finding that anywhere.”

Addie contends that providing this unique alternative to students, parents and the community is part of his mission to change the face of education.

“That’s why we’re here. That’s why I left the traditional public school. ... I’m going to be part of change that is going to truly make a difference. If we don’t get it done in the long run, we will go down in a flame of glory,” he finishes.