

A resource fair at Pittsfield High School connected special education students with organizations about future job opportunities

- By Matt Martinez, The Berkshire Eagle

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Kimberly Sorensen and Kaylee Persico of UCP of Western Massachusetts were all smiles Tuesday during the resource fair at Pittsfield High School.

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PITTSFIELD — For years, seniors at Pittsfield High School have gone through “reality fairs” to prepare them for the real world.

Rotating through stations, students are assigned a prospective job for the future and learn from an array of vendors about the things they’ll have to manage as adults. They hear from banks, insurance companies, utilities and more to get a taste of what real life is like.

But last year, Analeese Matos realized something was missing: the opportunity wasn’t as accessible for students in special education as it was for their counterparts in general education.

On Tuesday, she changed that.

Matos, a senior, organized a resource fair in the school’s library to bring in organizations around the county and state that provide employment and services to people with disabilities. From 9:30 to 11:30 a.m., special education students in the school were invited to learn more about their options after graduation.

“I think it’s very beneficial, so that they’re able to achieve the same outcomes as students without disabilities and get a fair chance of working in a job,” Matos said. “Or if they can’t get a job, they still have other places to go besides going nowhere.

The resource fair included community partners such as Berkshire County Arc, the Berkshire Athenaeum, United Cerebral Palsy of Berkshire County, ServiceNet and MassHire to inform the participating students about potential employment opportunities and resources available to them once they’ve graduated.

Mary Morrison, a math teacher, mentioned Prospect Meadow Farm as a great opportunity for students with disabilities. Formerly Jodi’s Flower Farm, the growing operation was recently purchased by ServiceNet, and will provide employment for people with disabilities.

Matos also orchestrated the revival of the Best Buddies Program, which had fallen by the wayside during the pandemic. Best Buddies pairs special and general education students at the school for extracurricular activities during an advisory period during the day, Morrison said.

Morrison, adviser for the program, said that the resource fair, a project of the Best Buddies Program, was the first of its kind in the six years she's been at the school.

She said the program allows students to engage in a variety of activities: some days it may be arts and crafts, such as hand turkeys for Thanksgiving or drawing activities. Others, it might be a physical activity like bowling or basketball in the school’s gymnasium.

“We just take a day to have fun and get out of the school environment for everybody and just kind of chill out,” said Roshan Warriar, a senior at PHS.

Jake Bassi, a participant in the program, said playing basketball was his favorite activity as part of the program. He said he particularly enjoys passing the ball.

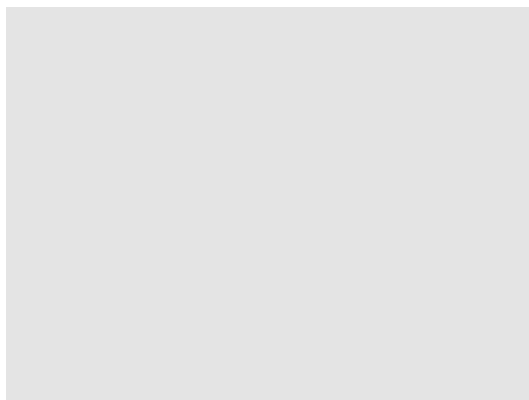
Bassi and Warriar were buddied up during Tuesday's resource fair. Bassi said he was most interested in what he learned from the Department of Developmental Services and United Cerebral Palsy of Berkshire County.

Warriar has been in the program since the beginning of this year. He began his involvement with the Unified Sports programs at the school, a program that allows athletes with intellectual disabilities to play team sports with general education students, namely basketball, and track and field.

He said that part of the program is learning how to effectively communicate with people who have intellectual disabilities. If someone is nonverbal, for instance, the general education students need to learn how to “make sure they’re getting the most out of it and having fun,” he said.

“It’s really good with learning how to work with all different types of people and sort of coming out of your comfort zone,” said Joyce Makdisi, another student participating in the program.

Matos’ work to restore the Best Buddies program and organize the resource fair stems from a “passion project” she identified during a course titled “Facilitating Community Change.” She focused specifically on inclusivity in the workforce for people with intellectual disabilities.



Gabby DeJesus, 15, and Taryn Griffin, 16, chat with Cody Tannen-Barrup of Viability during Tuesday's resource fair at Pittsfield High School.

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Matos said she was also motivated by the divide she saw between students in special and general education, and wanted to create more opportunities for students at the school to lift each other up.

“I kind of just asked myself, ‘What’s something that PHS wants and needs?’” Matos said.

“Maybe we can stop the divide and people can actually make friends and get along with each other. That’s when I came up with Best Buddies, so they can create those lifelong friendships.”

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