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RICK AGRETTO, Bethlehem Area School District's special education director



Harry Fisher The Morning Call

LISA GOODRICH (left) and her daughter Emily, 14. Emily, a ninth-grader at Liberty High School, attends Bethlehem Area's school-to-work transition fair, where government agencies and nonprofits offer advice for parents of disabled students.

Skills for a better life

Bethlehem Area School District offers developmental, career guidance for parents, disabled students

By Steve Esack

Of The Morning Call

Lisa Goodrich looks at her 14-year-old daughter and sees innocence.

And that scares her.

Shy Emily is a mentally challenged child who, only when she feels comfortable, will talk of her love of baking, her enthusiasm for playing the drums, and her prowess in math, even if she does not like the subject.

“You are one smart cookie,” Lisa Goodrich likes to say.

Then the fear creeps in. It comes when Goodrich thinks about the day when Emily, a “life skills” special education student at Liberty High School, will leave the protection of her family and school to join a work force where jobs can be hard to find and keep for people like Emily, who is autistic and mentally retarded.

So last week Goodrich, of Bethlehem Township, decided to get a jump start on career and life planning for Emily. They attended the Bethlehem Area School District's school-to-work transition fair, where government agencies and nonprofits offered advice for parents of disabled teens.

The job fair was meant to give parents a head start in planning for the day their children will turn 21 and have to leave Liberty's life skills program. In the program, students are taught math, reading, household budgeting and house-keeping skills. A teacher serves as job coach while the students train as interns in food service, custodial and retail work.

“Most of the students leave the program gainfully employed,” said Rick Agretto, Bethlehem's special education director. “But it is important families become familiar with resources once the students leave

our system.”

The 38 families who signed up for the job fair got information from their children's teachers and employment advice from Pennsylvania CareerLink and Private Industry Council of the Lehigh Valley. They made contacts at agencies such as VIA of the Lehigh Valley. They found out what help and programs are offered from the state Department of Labor and Industry's Office of Vocational Rehabilitation.

“It's always good to start the process rolling as soon as possible” Goodrich said.

Under state law, special education students can stay in school until 21. Parents of severely disabled students usually opt for the maximum time, said Marcie Hrycyszyn, coordinator of Bethlehem's school-to-work transition program.

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“Parents feel students are safe and secure in school,” she said. “Then in a perfect world, agencies like PIC and VIA take over where we left off.”

The world is seldom perfect. Opportunities in adulthood for mentally retarded and autistic people are not as plentiful when compared with those available to people with other disabilities, according to data at the National Center for Education Statistics.

In 2005, about 36 percent of those with mental retardation who finished school in 1999-2000 or 2000-01 were employed and about 14 percent were living independently, national statistics show.

By comparison, 65 percent of emotionally disturbed graduates were employed and 25 percent were living on their own.

Sandra J. Magill of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation said parents often do not realize that school-based special education is mandatory. But once students hit 21, they and their parents are on their own. Availability of adult services then is based on funding, not simply need, Magill said.

“A lot of times parents do not make referral to our office until right before their children are ready to leave school or have already left school,” she said. “Then the students sit at home and the parents do not know what to do.”

Ron Blaufarb of Hanover Township, Northampton

County, agreed. He said too many parents do not take advantage of the services schools, nonprofits and government agencies offer.

“If you ask questions, you’ll get answers,” Blaufarb said while his wife, Sharon, talked to teachers at the job fair.

Their daughter is richer for it. Allie Blaufard, 20, who is mentally retarded, has one year left of schooling. With the help of teachers, Ron Blaufarb said, Allie has improved her reading and job skills. Teachers are helping her develop street smarts she will need to survive next year and beyond.

“The school district has done a wonderful job in helping us access these programs,” he said. “I have every confidence in the world Allie will be a productive citizen.”