



Each and Every Child

An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education

Brewing up careers

If it were up to Melinda Collins, all of her students would leave school ready to pursue a career or college. Thankfully for her students, it *is* up to Collins.

Collins, a special education teacher at Des Moines' Ruby Van Meter, had an idea a few years back to give her students real-life work experience. It evolved into Plymouth Grounds, a full-scale coffee shop located in a tony part of Des Moines.

Collins said making the shop come to fruition involved vision, determination, a bit of courage and a whole lot of luck.

"The coffee shop opened as a private venture at my church, but closed because it wasn't viable," Collins said.

Viable, that is, as a for-profit organization. A nonprofit? You bet.



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

Jordan Charter, left, makes change for a customer at Plymouth Grounds Coffee Shop, which is used as a career launching ground for some students in the Des Moines school district.

"I saw this wonderful shop closed up, and finally got my courage to propose my idea of making it a business-school venture with the church," she said.

To her relief (and a bit of surprise), the church, Plymouth Congregational, said yes and even provided \$5,000 in start-up money.

Now in its second year, Plymouth Grounds – in which the slogan reads "We're brewing more than just coffee" – is operating in the black. There's a catch to that, however: The students aren't paid during the school year since it is considered school work. The

coffee shop runs through the summer months, as well, but since school isn't in session, Collins feels obligated to pay the workers.

Anywhere from three to four students ages 18 to 21 serve up coffee, lattes, and baked goods to customers Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to noon. (Students head back to classes at noon.)

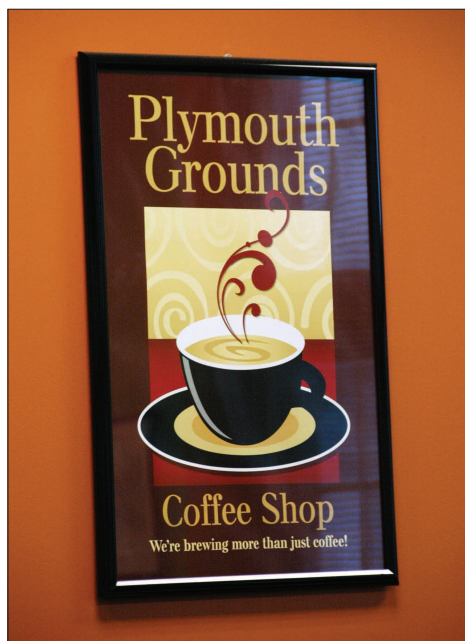
With the oversight of Collins, an associate, church volunteer, and church chef, students literally run the operation, from morning set-up to noon-time closure. In that time, students will serve, bus, bake, wash dishes, run

the cash register, and chat up regular customers. They also launder their uniforms and dish towels.

"What is nice is that they have had many years of academic training," Collins said. "The coffee shop gives them an opportunity to apply those academic skills in a work setting. They are working with money and the cash register – and there's lots of reading when it comes to the recipes."

Initially, Collins would pair students' skills with what she thought would be appropriate jobs – something she immediately realized was wrong.

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“I’m guilty of assuming students cannot go beyond a certain level,” she said. “In the first year, I selected high-functioning students for running the operation, and chose a student who needed more supports who I thought could clean tables and mop the floor. Boy, was I wrong. By the end of the semester, he was doing everything, including making lattes.

“That taught me that I need high expectations for all students.”

Throughout the semester, Collins progress monitored the students’ essential work skills.

“If something isn’t working right, then we model, practice, and try again,” she said.

The efforts pay off. Of the 14 students who have rotated through the semester-long program, seven are competitively employed, another five are still in school, and one works in a family business. Only one is choosing not to work at this time.

The students need lots of supervision at the beginning of the semester.

“But toward the end of the semester, students are putting in orders for the coffee, communicating with the chef when we’re running low on pastries,” Collins said. “They count the money and balance it.”



Chris Cortez whips up a latte for a customer at Plymouth Grounds, where students get their feet wet in the working world.

They have even learned to deal with a stress which is the exclusive domain of restaurant own-

ers: a visit from the health department.

“When he walked in, we were initially, ‘oh, no, what are you going to do to us?’” Collins said. “But we ended up having the highest possible score from the health department right after the surprise visit.”

Tips are accepted at the shop, and spent on the students at the end of the semester.

“At the end of the semester, we take a day with the volunteers and go out for a nice lunch at a restaurant with menus,” Collins said. “When I first asked them where they wanted to go for lunch, the students suggested places like Burger King. So I decided on Noah’s Ark, where there are table cloths, silverware, cloth napkins, a waiter and a menu they had to read.

“One young man – you could



Alexandra Boucher goes over a cookie recipe with Teacher Melinda Collins.

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tell he had never been in that kind of restaurant – he ordered spaghetti and was asked what kind of salad he wanted. He said, ‘Well, I didn’t order salad,’ but he found out it came with the spaghetti.

“Anything left over after dinner, we go shopping,” which amounted to \$50 per student.

In its two years, the coffee shop already has built a steady staple of customers.

“It’s a nice work space, and I just love supporting it,” said Kristen Hall, a professional mediator, who drops by a couple times a week. “The kids are so happy, so eager to work here and take care of customers. I try to have meetings here when I can.”

But even more important, the students love it.



Jenny Wetzel washes dishes in anticipation of the next rush of customers.

Nineteen-year-old Alexandra Boucher, who wants to someday work in retail, said she looks forward to work.

“The people are great, and I’ve met lots of new friends,” she said. “It is my happy place. Making lattes is my favorite. It is fun adding the different flavors, then the foam and adding the cinnamon topping.”

Jordan Charter, 21, favors the cash register.

“I like handling money,” she said. “I like using my math.”

That’s music to Collins’ ears.

“I love watching these students grow,” she said. “What more can we do than to ensure these kids become happy, productive members of our society?”

Postscript: Since the visit, Alexandra Boucher landed a paid job at Marshall’s, and Chris Cortez is working for UPS.



Alexandra Boucher displays her freshly baked chocolate chip cookies, ready to go to the sales counter. (Editor’s note: They were oh-my-gosh good.)



Students, teachers and volunteers at Plymouth Grounds pose for a photo after another successful day.

The February edition of Each and Every Child touched a lot of readers throughout the state. The issue focused on the practices of high-growth schools. Below is a sampling of your thoughts.

I want to commend you on the last e-newsletter. I teach high school special education. I love my job. I have been teaching for this district for the past five years. It has taken me that long to get where I am. When I got here, most of the time the special education kids were on the D & F list. I was so frustrated. Not only did their disability seem to "get in the way" but education itself was "in the way" of their learning.

Today, most of my time is spent working with the general education teachers to empower them to teach the special education kids. We mostly accommodate, but if we need to, we can modify to help students be successful. I have to confess the last D & F list that came out, I had only two students who were failing a class. Yeah!!!!

I am making progress and I am glad that your e-newsletter was there to confirm what I am doing. Thank you.

Brenda Gonzales
Special Education Teacher, Laurens-Marathon

From Bondurant:
Wonderful article. Those of us in the field who have had great success knew all of these to be true. I am glad the DE finally put it all together and published it!!! Kudos to the DE for this report, the profession of special education has needed this type of guidance!!!!

From Shenandoah:
Thank you for this pertinent information. We can never quit evolving in educational practices, especially when it comes to our special needs students. This subject hits very close to home with me.

From Dubuque:
Here, here! That is quality instruction in general education also. And. . . I might add, that differentiation happens within the CORE. In my world of early childhood, it is the CORE plus MORE! I applaud your comments about how critical that communication piece is!

To the editor:
I am a special education teacher. After reading this article and going through the characteristics of the high- and low-achieving schools, I noticed I was more comfortable saying that our school and district had more of the low characteristics than the high. What, as a teacher, can I do to get my school moving in the right direction? How do I encourage my fellow co-workers that we can be a high achieving school? I know the first thing is to get rid of the complaining we have in our school, but how should I go about that?

Answer: As with anything, change doesn't occur without strong leadership in place. Leadership isn't in a title, but, rather, an individual. Based on your comments, we believe you could lead the change yourself – first, talking to the principal and close coworkers, and then going with some coworkers to a high-growth district to observe their work.

The bottom line is this: No one is comfortable with change. That said, if a new concept is observed that truly makes a difference, most people walk away saying, "Yes, let's do it." The efforts, after all, are for the kids.

Your individual belief system will dictate outcomes about 99 percent of the time. If you truly believe that each child can succeed, they will. But get this: They will only succeed as much as you think they can succeed. If you think the sky is the limit, the child will perform accordingly.

Of course, it would be ideal if a formal system in your school was in place. But, regardless, you, as an individual, can make very real, positive changes.

Characteristics of high-growth systems

- Ownership
- High Expectations
- Inclusion/Collaborative Teaching
- Early Intervention System
- Professional Development
- Instruction focuses on skill building
- Use of data to inform instruction
- Use of data to plan professional development
- Collaboration between general education and special education