



Pictured:  
DeLisa Russel, Supervisor  
& Students

## HEAD OF THE CLASS

*A progressive work-based learning program allows local high school students to gain a leg up in the manufacturing world.*

**“THE BOTTOM LINE is trying to get kids to grow and become young adults. This is building for their future. It’s helping build better workers and better community leaders.”**

As the workforce continues to get more competitive, Coffee County Central High School aims to prepare its students for employment in the real world, as evidenced by an innovative new partnership with Manchester-based manufacturer VIAM.

“The VIAM experience,” as they’re calling it, launched in July as the brainchild of Richard Skipper, CCCHS Career and Technical Education Director, with the first cell of 11 students beginning at the company a few weeks before school was back in session. Thanks to word of mouth, news of the program spread, and a handful of others joined by the end of the first quarter.

VIAM has been supplying the automotive industry with custom

design floor, trunk and cargo mats for 33 years, and participating students work at the plant after school from Monday through Thursday, learn core skills of the workplace and even get compensated for their time. There are requirements—such as attendance and a minimum grade point average—that participants must meet, the most important of which is being on track to graduate.

“We’re looking to develop a career-ready student,” Skipper says. “In the past, it might have been the college student or the vocational student, but what we’ve come to realize is it’s really the career-ready student. That could mean four years of college or two years of college or some type of certification while they’re in high



school that's going to give them a leg up after they graduate. What we want to do is offer as many real-life challenges and links to what they're studying in school."

Though VIAM CEO Keith Hayes was taking a gamble when he agreed to take the students on as employees, Skipper says it's a win-win partnership, as VIAM will have the ability to sculpt and recruit potential long-term employees in a time when the state unemployment rate is hovering around 4.5 percent and demand for workers exceeds supply.

Work-based learning isn't exactly a new concept—there are now 9,000 students state-wide enrolled in similar programs, CCCHS Principal Dr. Joey Vaughn says. But what VIAM and the high school are doing is unique.

"The innovation with VIAM is that we're putting our students in a manufacturing setting as seniors in high school. Up to this point, workers had to be 18 years old in order to work. The partnership with VIAM allows our 17-year-old seniors to gain work experience," he says.

CCCHS has long offered other work-based learning programs, as well, including service learning, CNA in health sciences, and basic co-op aligning with programs like culinary arts or marketing; in fact, 48 of the 477 Class of 2017 graduates are participating in work-based learning, in addition

to another 60 Capstone students. Skipper explains that the department of education recently redefined work-based learning "so that it needs to align with students' programs of study and so that it's actually leading to some kind of post-secondary opportunity," hence the perfect time to try out something new like the VIAM Experience.

As with any first-time, out-of-the-box endeavor, Skipper says he anticipated some bumps in the road due to the nature of the partnership, but so far has been pleasantly surprised at how smoothly everything has run.

"We're blueprinting this because it's brand new, and I've been waiting for the shoe to fall because everything had been so positive, but it hasn't," Skipper says. "I think that's because VIAM without my students is set up for the employees to be successful, from the benefits they offer to the audits they do among their workers. A lot of things that were required for my students to go out there, VIAM already had in place."

Dr. Vaughn adds, "Anytime you bring new workers into a program, there is a learning curve, but I can't say enough about the support Richard and Keith have given to this program and to our school. The VIAM partnership has given

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the student participants a work experience that can't be replicated in a classroom."

Students are treated like any other employee, Skipper says, with work attendance mandatory, and while they don't receive health insurance, they do enjoy a bevy of other incentives, such as access to a doctor, chiropractor, weight room and fitness facility on site. Skipper will continue to welcome new participants each quarter, and once students complete the 15 standards of the work-based learning program, they leave with what he calls "an upper hand:" work time to put on their resumes, a portfolio of assignments and safety trainings, and a manufacturing certification from VIAM.

And while it may seem challenging for a teenager to juggle working and studying at the same time, Dr. Vaughn believes it's been beneficial to both their study and work ethic.

"The key is communication between all of the individuals. In order to go to work our students have to be present at school and remain on track to graduate," he says.

"It has been a huge incentive for some of them to complete their education because work-based learning allows them to come to school as well as work and make money."

It helps that the school keeps close tabs on the students' performance, both in class and at work. Skipper adds that Hayes has incentivized attendance by increasing their \$10.50 hourly salary by a dollar an hour after they've been at work every day for 90 days.

"If a student doesn't come to school, they're not allowed to go to work that day. Our purpose is to promote attendance at school and at work," he says. "But since we've incorporated this, the students we have in play right now, their attendance is upside-down compared to what it was their first couple years in school. It's because there are requirements, there are expectations."

by Kristin Luna

