

## Special education career program hailed as AYP booster

A 20-year-old program designed to help disabled high school students enter science and technology fields can help schools make adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act, proponents say.

The High School/High-Tech (HS/HT) program is an especially attractive model for schools and districts, given the law's emphasis on raising the achievement of special education students, according to **Mary Podmostko**, senior project associate at the **Institute for Educational Leadership**.

"It is an excellent product to help schools meet their [NCLB] goals," she said.

The institute participated in a recent conference to help educators start HS/HT programs in their districts. The program has cross appeal to special education departments, career and technical education departments, and those interested in high school reform, Podmostko said.

### Born in L.A.

HS/HT originated as a nonprofit organization in Southern California, started by parents of disabled children who believed that public schools weren't holding their students to high expectations. They saw technology and science fields as places where their kids could potentially flourish.

The **Atlantic Richfield Company** and the **Los Angeles Unified School District** designed the first program in 1985. **NASA** and the **President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities** in the **Labor Department** began to provide federally funded grants, and programs began to take root, especially in states with NASA facilities.

### Job shadowing, site visits, mentoring

The program's core features provide disabled students with job shadowing, site visits, mentoring and internships to help them transition into the working world. Some programs allow nondisabled students to participate.

**Joan Willis**, director of the **Center for Workforce Development** at the IEL, said more work needs to be done to assess the program's effectiveness. Studies are underway to compare participants' dropout rates to other special education students, and to determine how many go on to postsecondary education.

### Oklahoma's experience

Oklahoma has 15 schools with High School/High Tech programs, and six more will be added this fall, said **Rick DeRennaux**, state HS/HT coordinator.

The Tech-Now programs, as they're called in Oklahoma, simulate the work world by asking students to set up their own business, where they design and produce model cars or rockets.

Students use spreadsheets to calculate the costs of what they're producing. If they're late for class, it's tantamount to being late for a job. Timesheets are kept like regular businesses.

The biggest challenge spreading the program in the state has been "convincing teachers that they can do this," DeRennaux said. The technology used in the classroom can be intimidating, but it's not as hard to learn as it appears, he added.

"Meanwhile, the anecdotal evidence is stunning," she said. "But we know that's not enough."

**Matt Conroy**, an HS/HT program director at **Palm Bay High School**, Melbourne, Fla., said when disabled students enter his program as freshmen, they are "clueless" about the career options available to them. "When they graduate, they might be undecided, but at least they're not clueless anymore," he said.

The Labor Department's **Office of Disability Employment Policy** (ODEP) has provided five-year grants of \$225,000 each to seven states for demonstration projects, hoping the concept will spread, according to ODEP spokeswoman **Peggy Abrahamson**.

Additional funding must come from other public and private sources. The program costs approximately \$1,500 per year, per student.

Abrahamson said the federal seed money is not intended to last forever. It will be up to HS/HT programs to convince schools and districts that the program is worthwhile.

*For more information about the program, see [www.dol.gov/odep/programs/high.htm](http://www.dol.gov/odep/programs/high.htm). A list of grantees can be found at [www.ncwd-youth.info/innovative\\_Grantees/index.php](http://www.ncwd-youth.info/innovative_Grantees/index.php).*

—**Stew Magnuson**