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SPECIAL SUMMER WORK EXPERIENCE PROGRAM*

AMES CURCHIN

In an effort to improve the preparation of graduates for facing the future with a better understanding of the field of employment, the Rochester School for the Deaf inaugurated a new Work Experience/Program last summer.

This program, sponsored and financed by the Federal Government under Title I grants, was established to:

1. Enable the deaf student to gain some valuable and meaningful occupational insight which can be related to the school program.
2. Give the employer an opportunity to become acquainted with and have first hand experience with a deaf person and thus be able to formulate a more positive attitude toward hiring the deaf.
3. Develop in the student the proper attitude towards work, employers and co-workers.
4. Give the deaf child a much broader exposure to the various occupations.
5. Learn about the problems involved in adjustment to work situations.

After graduation from school, young deaf adults have difficulty in job entry placement and adjustment to employment situations. The graduate must become familiar with the problems he must face in preparation for a job, such as making out applications, communicating with employers and co-workers, work procedures, company policies, development of skills and over-all performance.

The value of a Work Experience Program is emphasized by the following quote from a report of the National Con-

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*(A project supported by ESEA Title I funds during the summer of 1967)

ference on Education of the Deaf held in Colorado Springs from April 12-25, 1967.

"Vocational Guidance Programs (for the deaf) will not be effective unless they bring the student face to face with the actual conditions of employment. Such orientation to employment must be conducted by counselors skilled in the communication media of the deaf."

An actual experience of employment is the most valuable and efficient means of adjustment, but the deaf youngster who is still in school does not have the same opportunity to obtain summer employment as his hearing counterpart. Employers are often skeptical and apprehensive about employing the deaf through the summer due to lack of communication ability and the lack of knowledge of the capabilities of deaf. With a trained counselor always available to help in the area of communication and adjustment, the employers are most receptive to the idea of giving the deaf person the opportunity to exhibit his ability and prove himself.

The administration of the program called for the employment of nine deaf students to work six hours a day for four days a week from July 10th to August 4th. The trainees were selected as typical deaf students who were between 16 and 18 years of age, able to commute to work in the Rochester area and expected to return to school for at least one more year.

After the selection of the trainees was made, the participants met with the counselor who explained the plans and inquired as to their interest and desire to participate. Letters were written to the parents explaining the plans, procedure and objectives of the program. The students and the parents were very enthusiastic about the idea and were all extremely eager to be enrolled, indicating the children would be available for summer employment.

The first step in putting the plans into operation required the establishment of work situations. The counselor visited several companies in the Rochester area. The original interview consisted of a discussion of the problems of the deaf in seeking employment, an explanation of the planned program and an inquiry into the possibility of the company employing a student worker. Verbal commitments were obtained with the understanding that the prospective trainees would be brought for an interview before final arrangements were made.

Following this the students were taken for an interview at their selected work stations. They followed the complete procedure required for obtaining a job. Introductions were made, applications were completed, work permits were signed where necessary, and there was a discussion of hours of work

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and type of job for each participating trainee. Each trainee applied for and received his Social Security Card.

In order to keep communications intact and for closer understanding of what was expected, a letter was sent to each child the week before he was to start working to make sure each one knew exactly what to do on his first day.

The counselor visited each company the first day and subsequently bi-weekly visits were made to check on the ability of the trainees to adjust to their situations and discuss the progress of the trainees with their supervisors and friends. The results of these consultations and observations were the basis for discussion in group guidance sessions which were held each Friday morning as all of the participants assembled at the school. During these sessions the students had an opportunity to discuss the nature of the problems of adapting to the working environment.

These discussions centered around such topics as:

1. Reasons for having a work experience program.
2. Qualities and personal characteristics the employer and counselor will look for and observe.
3. Employer - Employee relationships.
4. Weekly paychecks with deductions.
5. Income and budgeting.
6. Social Security, Taxes and year end W-2 forms.

The entire program was a very valuable experience to the trainees and proved to be extremely effective in meeting many problems of employment adjustment. The students all indicated that without this program they would have been unable to obtain summer employment. In some instances they would not have tried and in others they thought that they would not have been able to interest an employer in giving them an opportunity due to communication difficulties.

Throughout the experience both on the job and in counseling seasons the co-ordinator stressed the qualities of character that would be observed during employment. In interrogating the supervisors and those working with the trainees, everyone had a high regard for the deaf students. The employers rated all of them from average to excellent in appearance, cooperation, obedience to company rules, and ability to follow instructions. Only one trainee rated below average in work habits.

Four of the employers had little or no experience with the deaf. Some were apprehensive about hiring a deaf employee. However, with the assurance that the counselor would always be available to assist with the communication problem, they consented to participate in the program. After this experience with the trainee, they agreed that their apprehensions were unfounded. They were extremely impressed with

the ability of the participants and found that the problem of communication was not as much of an obstacle as had been anticipated. If verbal communication was unsuccessful, then writing and demonstration were reliable. Those in charge were surprised and elated with the work habits and attitude of most of the trainees.

In most instances the exposure to a variety of occupations was available only through observation and discussion. It was felt by employers that four weeks was not long enough to give training in more than one area. The age of some trainees limited the types of work they were allowed to do under the state laws. However, during the experience the children were able to observe other types of work being done and in some instances would be able to relate their school vocational training in their direction of interest.

All of the participating employers were very cooperative and willing to do anything possible to make this a successful program.

As a result of this experience those employers who were not familiar with the deaf now realize the potential of the qualified deaf worker and understand that although there is difficulty in communication, the problem is not insurmountable. Once the deaf employee understands the job to be done he works steadily independently and dependably.

It is a tribute to the participants and the program that eight of the trainees had an opportunity to continue working for the remainder of the summer with their respective companies. Two of these were unable to do so because of previously arranged vacation plans. All of the employers indicated that they would be willing to consider participation in this type of program the next year.

The trainees, the parents, and the employers thought this program provided a broader knowledge regarding vocational and occupational problems and was highly successful in meeting its objectives. Everyone concluded that this experience was invaluable in helping to prepare these students for a much better adjustment to society after graduation.

FUTURE PLANS

This project which proved to be extremely worthwhile and highly successful during the summer of 1967, was deleted because of insufficient funds. It was considered a high priority program which was to be reinstated when funds became available.

The continuation and expansion of this program for the summer of 1968 has been made possible because of the interest and support of the New York State Division of Vocation-

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al Rehabilitation. This agency has given valuable assistance to our graduates and now we are very fortunate that they wish to extend their services to include this program with our students who are still in school. Arrangements have been made for a cooperative effort in which the financial responsibility will be shared by the Rochester School for the Deaf and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

The program will be expanded to include more students, extend the working day and allow some of the older students who are not residents of the Rochester area to participate by living on the premises of the Rochester School for the Deaf.

The Rochester School for the Deaf under Title I Funds will support the guidance counselor's salary and travel expenses, dormitory supervisor's salary, and other indirect costs including dormitory and classroom expenses.

The resources of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation are to be used for the financial support of the trainees involved under their Work-Study regulations. The value of coordinating the education and rehabilitation of the deaf through Work-Study Programs is gaining increased recognition.

Throughout the United States development of closer relationships between schools for the deaf and rehabilitation agencies on projects of this type will result in greatly improved services for deaf students in preparation for facing their responsibilities as they approach adulthood.