

South Kitsap graduates hired by school district

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Madelyn Weinkauf moves confidently amid the buzz and chatter of lunch hour at the East Port Orchard Elementary cafeteria.

Weinkauf collects trays, dumping leftover food into a container of scraps bound for the compost bin, which supports the school's food-to-flowers program. She helps students who dump their own trays keep from spilling, and she delivers dirty trays to the kitchen to keep the lunchtime routine running smoothly.

"Miss Maddie," as the kids call her, is outgoing and friendly but not afraid to keep students in line when they need it.

"They help me. I help them. It's like a whole entire family," said Weinkauf, 28, a South Kitsap High School graduate employed by South Kitsap School District through Trillium Employment Services.

Trillium connects workers with intellectual disabilities to employers who have needs they can fill.

"We love her. She's great," said Renee Durupt, in charge of the elementary's cafeteria. "I loved the idea when I first heard about it."

"It's been a win-win so far for our school," Principal Paul Hulbert said. "We're getting our needs met. Our students are learning to work with diversity and vice versa."

Weinkauf, an extrovert by nature, livens up the cafeteria and makes a fashion statement, wearing an Alice in Wonderland print dress from Hot Topic and a pink jewel necklace.

"I like to see what she comes in every day because she's always got some cool outfit," Durupt said.



Madelyn Weinkauf laughs with the sixth-graders during lunch at East Port Orchard Elementary School. The South Kitsap School District has hired her through Trillium Employment Services. She works the food-to-flowers recycling center. LARRY STEAGALL / KITSAP SUN

People with disabilities have valuable skills to contribute to the workforce but are underutilized, according to the National Governors Association, which in 2012 launched an initiative to promote hiring within this group of workers. Of the estimated 54 million Americans living with a disability, 20 percent are employed or seeking employment, compared to almost 70 percent of Americans without a disability, according to the NGA.

Trillium, a private nonprofit with branches in Kitsap, King, Pierce and Clark counties, is out to reverse that trend.

"Our agency focuses on individualized employment," said Heidi Scheibner, Kitsap's Trillium program manager. "The only way this works is if there is a business need. We don't want this to be a charity hire."

East Port Orchard also employs Adam Minor, 22, another SKHS grad placed through Trillium. Minor works in the library, shelving books and helping students check in books.

"It's awesome. I really appreciate his help," said librarian Heather Wilson, who assigns Minor tasks that "typically get pushed to the bottom of my to-do list."

Placing clients in a school setting is a first for Trillium's Kitsap County branch. The partnership started with Tara Zink, a Trillium employment consultant who knows Superintendent Michelle Reid from earlier in Reid's career, when she was a high school principal.

Trillium already was coordinating with South Kitsap's community transitions program, which teaches life skills to students with disabilities.

Zink last spring approached Reid, who put the word out to schools. Hulbert identified needs in the cafeteria and library.

Trillium employment consultants provided one-on-one job coaching until Weinkauf and Minor felt comfortable with their work routines, and the agency remains in touch with school staff. The district is the employee, however, not Trillium.

Beyond the paycheck, employment provides Trillium clients with a chance to develop skills and advance their careers, Scheibner said. It also fosters independence. Weinkauf and Minor ride an Access bus to work, and Minor is readying to move out of his parents' house into a group living situation.

Weinkauf said the job has opened up possibilities for her. As for goals, she said, "It still is wide open for me."

SK schools are open to hiring more employees through Trillium, said Amy Miller, district spokeswoman. And Trillium now is networking with local districts hoping for other school job placements, Zink said.

The trillium in the agency's logo and name is a three-petal flower that signifies the business, the job seeker and the employment consultant.