

Greenhouse partnership to aid students with disabilities

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Working at We Grow Dreams Greenhouse and Garden Center for the past two years has benefited 19-year-old Edward Pinc in several ways, he said.

While working with his uncle, Phil Urbanek, he has learned a lot about plants. It also helps to relieve stress, he said.

"My uncle's my job coach," Pinc said. "We have fun together. It's like uncle and nephew bonding time. We have fun."

Pinc, who is enrolled in Naperville School District 203's Secondary Transitional Experience Program, was among those gathered Tuesday morning in the West Chicago greenhouse as the district and not-for-profit organization officially signed a business partnership agreement.

We Grow Dreams was created to provide training and employment opportunities for people with disabilities, said Donna Jarmusz, one of the founders.

"We thought 'what are we going to do when our children leave the school system?'" Jarmusz said. "Really we wanted something that was very labor intensive and low technology."

While the greenhouse is in West Chicago, 60 percent of We Grow Dreams' team members come from Naperville and are part of District 203 or 204. It was started in 2005 by three Naperville families: the Jarmusz, Swanson and Rordan families.

After researching different options, they decided to establish the greenhouse, she said.



District 203 signed an agreement Tuesday with We Grow Dreams Greenhouse and Garden Center in West Chicago to provide training and employment opportunities for students with disabilities. Here, students and officials pose inside the greenhouse.

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There are 45 different jobs that people with disabilities can do at We Grow Dreams, she said.

"This is a place where folks can get their feet wet in the job market and start to collaborate with people," Cindi Swanson said.

There are 30 students enrolled in District 203's STEP, which helps young adults ages 18 to 21 "to learn real-life skills for adulthood, and of course the push for employment," said Mary Onorad-Wilkiel, vocational coordinator for STEP.

While students enrolled in STEP have worked at the greenhouse since it opened, the district and organization didn't become formal business partners until Tuesday.

"The school district has been very supportive of us from the early days when we just had a vision," Jarmusz said.



Students sign partnership forms to participate in the We Grow Dreams program.

According to the agreement, the partnership will benefit District 203 students by providing job training, volunteer and field trip opportunities to students and teachers. Students of all grade levels will have the opportunity to work alongside a diverse population of students and adults challenged with disabilities. We Grow Dreams will

benefit through acknowledgment as a member of the Naperville-Lisle community, as well as expanding the number of volunteer and job opportunities.

"This is a life-span kind of effort," Swanson said. "We'd like to see students and faculty from the district support the mission of the greenhouse."