

LOCAL



CARL KOSOLA / PHOTOJOURNALIST

Wakeisha English, Bancroft senior program associate, helps Clint English, 25, of Medford, with his ball skills as Mark Bradley, health and wellness specialist, directs Matt Goodgold, 27, of Medford, during exercise class at the Burlington County Special Services School in Westampton at the grand opening of the specialized adult program by Bancroft on Friday.



Video online

New adult day and jobs program fills 'critical need'

By SEAN PATRICK MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

WESTAMPTON — A new program at the Burlington County Special Services School District could provide some relief for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and their families, who can face an uncertain path once aging out of the school system and the services provided there.

Through a partnership with Bancroft, the Cherry Hill-based nonprofit day program for adults with special needs, the district's campus off Woodlane Road will now house an expanded specialized adult day and vocational training program.

On Friday, New Jersey Education Commissioner David Hespe and representatives from the district and Bancroft officially opened the program.

"Bancroft and BCSSSD are setting the stage to demonstrate how partnerships can transform lives, by providing high-quality comprehensive vocational and employment programming for adults with disabilities," Hespe said Friday.

It addresses what educators have come to know as the "post-21 cliff" in special education, referring to students aging out of the school programs.

"This facility has the capability that we see down the road becoming not only an adult day and employment service area, but also a place where evenings and weekends for adults we can create enrichment and educational opportunities for families," said Dennis Morgan, Bancroft's vice president of educational services and adult employment.

After students finish their formal education at age 21, families worry about finding meaningful services, programs and jobs for their loved ones who need extra support.

"That fear and that anxiety that a lot of parents face really stems from a lack of education and a lack of knowledge and insight into what options and services and resources are truly available to them," Morgan said. "We have an obligation to educate families and prepare them."

Services include behavior support, social skills, music therapy, and occupational, speech and physical therapy. There is also job training and community inclusion activities, officials said.

"All can be accommodated here," said Lori Shaffer, director of communications at Bancroft.

The new program, which has been in place since October, serves 24 adults. Morgan said it hopefully will grow three times by this time next year.

"What's beautiful about Bancroft is we meet each adult where they are in their life," he said, noting that it builds programs around students.

"This program will allow individuals to move and grow and expand both their social skills (and) their independent-living skills across a lifetime," Morgan said.

The goal is to find students jobs and a place to live in the community. The program focuses on daily activities, including task attention, on-task endurance, task fluency and pre-vocational and workplace behaviors, officials said.

Hespe said he is "thrilled" by the Bancroft program.

"Our programs need to go beyond 18, and maybe even go beyond 21, in order to serve the needs of these students," he said. "It's wonderful. It's great to see."

Superintendent Christopher Manno said the new program was created after hearing from the staff and community. They identified the aging out as a top concern for this special needs population, and Manno said the district, which serves students from 3 to 21, realized the district needed a partner to address the problem. Bancroft was a good match.

He said the program fills a "critical need."

"We are thrilled that this vision has come to reality," Manno said. "Here at Burlington County Special Services, we sought to create such a program on our campus. ... I'm just so honored that the two organizations are able to come together and provide a solution to a real problem for families and individuals."

He said the building that houses the program, known as Bancroft at Burlington, is the former junior and senior high school.

It was available since the district restructured the main campus to create "a more traditional feeling" elementary, middle and high school. Those junior and senior students were integrated into those schools.

Joanne McCarthy, mother of 22-year-old Tommy, had high praise for the program.

"I've been extraordinarily happy with the program," she said. "He's really made tremendous progress."

McCarthy's son has been with the Special Services District since high school.

Jeffrey Struhl, of Medford, is working on his skill development. The 25-year-old wants to get a job so he can save money to fly to Europe.

Shaffer said the rates for the program are set by the New Jersey Division of Developmental Disabilities.

"Each individual, depending on the intensity of the need, is individually allocated funds under the DDD model," she said.

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