

## VCU Start on Success in Action: An Employment Case Study

Malik\* is an eighteen year old young man who recently graduated, on-time, from a suburban high school with a regular diploma. He began receiving special education services in elementary school due to his Attention Deficit Disorder, and he was in classes with his peers without disabilities for the majority of the school day. Malik spent his first two years of high school out of state, living with his aunt and then his brother. He indicated both environments were difficult for him, and he was often absent from school due to an unstable home life. In the tenth grade, Malik moved back to Virginia to live with his mother, which was a better living situation for him.

Malik's attendance improved; however, he was still missing over ten days of school a year and was lacking classes for on-time graduation. The administration was aware of his excessive absences and his teachers were concerned that he might drop out. Malik indicated he wanted to graduate on-time, but he did not have any definite plans after high school. College was not an option due to the cost. His hope was to join the military or work full-time, but he wasn't sure how to pursue either option. Malik worked for a short time at Dairy Queen in tenth grade, but had to stop after a month in order to stay on track with school.

### Description of Program

At the end of Malik's junior year, he was recruited by his school case manager to apply to a new school-to-work program called Start on Success (SOS). This year-long structured program is for at-risk high school seniors with disabilities pursuing a regular diploma. Students enroll in a career and technical education course during the first semester and participate in a paid internship working 15 hours a week at a local business during the second semester of the school year. SOS assists students in discovering abilities, interests, and career pathways, and it places a strong emphasis on collaboration among schools, families, businesses, and employment support agencies. Students receive on-the-job support from school personnel and business mentors. Families reinforce employment and independent living skills at home, and vocational rehabilitation counselors participate in classroom workshops and SOS meetings.

## Student Experience

Malik was interested in earning a paycheck and receiving assistance with obtaining employment after high school. He applied, interviewed, and was accepted into the program, even though several members of the interview panel had concerns regarding his attendance history. Malik did not miss a day of school during the first semester of his senior year due to his motivation to earn a paycheck. His internship took place in the merchandising department of a science museum gift shop. He attended regularly and was responsible for taking inventory, restocking items, and providing customer service. His supervisors reported that Malik was dependable and reliable. Malik's teacher indicated he was very committed to successfully completing the SOS program. In fact, there was one instance where Malik contacted his teacher over a weekend to let her know his family abruptly moved and he did not want to jeopardize his job or paycheck. Malik was so determined to not miss school, he rode his bike seven miles to school and back on three occasions.

## Impact of Program

The SOS program offered Malik the support, resources, and confidence he needed to successfully complete the program and graduate on-time. Malik stated it was his SOS teacher who provided him with encouragement, support, and resources to be successful at both school and work. The work experience gave him the opportunity to increase his confidence in a work setting and to "do harder things, interact with people, and have a strong desire to work." Malik indicated he felt relieved when he was accepted into the program. "I didn't know what I was going to do. I feel hope. Me and my mom live in an apartment and I am now able to pay some bills. It feels good that I can save up some money, pay some bills, and get my own place someday." With assistance from his SOS teacher, Malik was hired full-time with benefits as a cashier at a military base two-weeks after graduation. Malik stated, "I would recommend this program to anyone."

\*Student's name has been changed for purposes of confidentiality.