

dailypress.com/news/education/dp-nws-new-horizons-special-education-auto-body-20140306,0,2230254.story

dailypress.com

Hampton Roads auto body class gives confidence, job skills to 'at-risk' students

Course offered at New Horizons Regional Education Center in Hampton

By Sarah J. Pawlowski,
spawlowski@dailypress.com

6:17 PM EST, March 6, 2014

HAMPTON — The ratio had to be perfect.



Warhill High School student Sam Graber slowly poured water from one clear plastic container into another. Two classmates squatted to the ground, eye level to the edge of the table, and watched the liquid rise. Other teammates observed from the side.

"All right, a little bit more, bro, a little bit more," Kecoughtan High School senior Charles Cooper coached his classmate.

Graber stopped pouring, and his team nodded in approval. He flung his hand into the air to indicate the team was finished.

"Three points," auto body repair/prep teacher Daniel DiSalvo told the students to indicate their score for measuring out the correct ratio.

"Good job, Sam," Cooper said, patting Graber on the shoulder.

The New Horizons Regional Education Center students were learning to measure liquids to prepare them to mix paint for cars. The ratio must be perfect, Graber said, or the final product won't turn out.

"You don't want to put too much hardener in, or too much primer, or too much reducer," he said, "or it won't spray well."

Students from across the Peninsula attend the Hampton career and technical center to learn trades they can use in the workforce. But the auto body repair/prep class is unique because it is offered specifically to students who are "at-risk" of dropping out of school or might have difficulty

securing employment, according to principal David Creamer. Many of the students have learning disabilities or other academic barriers.

Students who take the class might not end up working on automobiles in the future, unlike other career-focused courses. The goal is to teach skills that can be used in many jobs and provide work-readiness training, like completing a daily time card. It's the only program of its kind offered at the school.

"We're basically trying to ... prepare them for employment," Creamer said.

Interest in the program has soared, according to Creamer, prompting the school to dedicate the class for "at-risk" students a few years ago. School officials would like to expand the program or offer additional classes like it, he said, but that will depend on funding.

"I do believe there is a need for more programs like this one," he said.

DiSalvo said he wants his students to learn they can repair many different things, like fiberglass or woodwork, using basic auto repair skills. But he also encourages creativity to keep the work interesting and fun.

Most importantly, he said, he wants his students to leave the class with a sense of accomplishment and increase their sense of self-worth.

"A lot of these kids, they come in here, they don't have a lot of confidence," he said.

Cooper said he wasn't sure he was going to like the class when he first started. He said school has always been a challenge, and he used to be a "smart aleck" and goof off in class. But he said he caught on quickly in auto body repair/prep, and he really enjoys the hands-on work. He said he would like to open his own auto body shop someday.

"I'm excited to get out in the workforce," he said.

Back around the workshop table, Cooper explained to a classmate how liquids have different weights, "like oil and water." He moved to another student to show her how to line up ounces to the ratios on the pre-marked containers.

The team attempted to mix another formula, but this time they didn't get it exactly right.

"Zero points," DiSalvo told them.

"That's OK," Cooper said to his classmate. "You did a good job measuring it. ... You, too," he said to another.

Pawlowski can be reached by phone at 757-247-7478.

Copyright © 2014, [Newport News, Va., Daily Press](#)