

Vermont Provides an Alternative

Kate Nicolet

When High School Doesn't Work

High school was not working for Jennifer Brooks. She had a hard time completing assignments, she was regularly bullied at school, and she needed a job to support her family members through various health emergencies. Jennifer had a clear goal. She wanted to become a nurse. But how could she pursue her dream without a high school diploma?

Thanks to a new program approved by the Vermont State Legislature, young adults (ages 16-21) now have a choice beyond dropping out of school or getting a GED. It is called the High School Completion Program (HSCP), and it is administered by the Vermont Department of Education through the local adult education and literacy programs that operate in partnership with the area high schools. The program has been in operation since July 2006, and in the year 2010, there were 238 graduates.

A Customized Plan to Finish

About two years ago, when Jennifer was 16 years old, her high school counselor told her about HSCP, and Jennifer wanted to try it. Jennifer came to Central Vermont Adult Basic Education (CV-ABE) to meet with the local HSCP coordinator. They completed basic skills assessments in reading, writing, and math to make sure Jennifer was eligible to begin HSCP with at least seventh-grade level skills.

The next step for Jennifer was to design her own Graduation Education Plan. This is like a personal road map to graduation that becomes an official agreement between Jennifer, her high school counselor, and her adult education provider. Together, they review and sign off on the plan. It is based on the student's interests and goals, high school graduation requirements, and the student's need for basic skills. Since the program is flexibly

built on student interests, no two plans are exactly alike. For instance, Jennifer's plan includes building up her writing skills, completing a social studies activity, and doing a math project. She was also able to take a course to prepare for the Licensed Nurses' Assistant (LNA) certification. To complete the course, she needed a text book and some special equipment like scrubs and a blood pressure cuff. The HSCP, with state education funds, could pay for these expenses in Jennifer's plan according to a reimbursement rate schedule. In fact, Jennifer is eligible for other reimbursements as well, including a mileage reimbursement to use her own car to get to the LNA course meetings.

What's the Recipe for Success?

Jennifer and many other young adults have found a comfortable place in the adult learning center. What has made it work? According to Jennifer, these factors have helped her succeed at HSCP:

- easy access to a teacher and counselor
- giving and receiving feedback from peers
- participating in hands-on learning
- the absence of bullying
- staying focused on her goals
- the fact that she has time to hold down a job

Jennifer has at this point passed her LNA exam and estimates that she will be graduating this spring. At that point, she will be re-enrolled in her high school of residence in order to receive the same diploma as the other graduates. Jennifer has had a positive learning experience and would recommend HSCP to other students. "Coming here has made me a better person," she says.

Kate Nicolet works on the adult education and literacy team at the Vermont Department of Education. For more information about HSCP, go to <http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pgm_adulted/hscp.html>.