Entry Name:

Nothing beats firsthand experience for students exploring healthcare career options

Organization Name:

Tacoma Public Schools

Category:

Excellence in Writing
Why did we tell this story?
Giving students first-hand work experience outside the classroom to directly shape their futures is a growing priority for our school district. Our Career and Technical Education (CTE) program hit the mark with a new program that helps students get clinical experience in a healthcare facility and a paid internship. CTE is supported by voter-approved levy funding.

A surprising thing revealed in the reporting of this story was a secondary lesson students learned through their work experience. More than just the technical skills they gained, their confidence grew, and they felt their career options open. Taezha Watson for example, still isn’t entirely sure she’ll go into healthcare. But training as a CNA helped her cement her desire to work with people during a vulnerable time in their life. The work also developed her independence and reassured her that she has options. That message humanizes the experience even more, and hopefully leaves the reader feeling this program is valuable for students and a good investment by the school district.

What challenges lay in telling this story?
This story was written during the pandemic, so logistics were an issue. Our original interviews had to be rescheduled due to a COVID-19 outbreak at the facility where the students worked, which shrunk our reporting and production timeline. Thankfully, our partners continued to work with us through the difficulties, understanding the importance of sharing stories like this – a story with a clear link between the student experience and the positive outcome it can provide.

Target audiences
Telling this story was a way to personalize the need for operations levy funding. We needed that message to reach this set of voters so they could understand what they would be supporting with their vote:

-Parents of students currently enrolled in our schools
-People of voting age without students currently in our schools
-Tacoma Public Schools’ staff

We ran the CTE story in tools that would reach those audiences. They included our “Spotlight” newsletter, district e-newsletter and website, and social media.
Nothing beats firsthand experience for students exploring healthcare career options

Wearing her scrubs, pink surgical mask, and thick-soled, comfortable black shoes, 17-year-old Taezha Watson looked every bit the medical professional as she walked the hallways of Good Samaritan Hospital in Puyallup.

Watson spent five days at Good Sam learning and doing the job of a certified nursing assistant—taking vital signs for patients, feeding and cleaning them, learning how to chart patient data, and comforting them through difficult moments.

By experiencing the work, Watson’s confidence increased, and she realized she could be well-suited for a job in health care.

“I wasn’t sure I would be good at it,” she said. “I wasn’t confident in my abilities. And now I know I can do it.”

That’s the hope for all 24 students in the first group selected for TPS’ new Next Move Nursing Career Launch Program. The students participate in a 90-hour certified nursing assistant training program and a 40-hour clinical experience in a health care facility before taking the exam to become a certified nursing assistant.

The Next Move Internship Program has provided students in Tacoma with career exploration and preparation training for many years through unpaid, community-based internship experiences. This new program builds on that by providing students with meaningful classroom learning, an industry-recognized certification, and a paid on-the-job internship.

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feel a more personal connection and understand the whole-patient experience.

“If I’m going to be a technician while someone is getting a knee replacement, I want to have empathy for them after their surgery,” she said. “Are they experiencing pain? What do they need? How can I help?”

A week at Deer Ridge Memory Care Community gave her some of the insight she was looking for.

When her work shift started at 6 a.m., she and her mentor CNA headed toward the patients who needed the most help starting their day. Prots helped bathe, dress and feed them, and she got them moving either by helping them walk or pushing them in a wheelchair.

“It’s that first-hand experience that really matters, according to John Page, the school district’s director of Career and Technical Education.

“Kids in school typically interact with a textbook or lecture. We’re trying to get kids real work experiences with employers and the industry, where the experience they get and the relationships they develop have such a critical impact,” Page said. “They’re learning to create relationships and show compassion. You don’t learn that out of a book.”

Mount Tahoma senior Alina Prots agrees wholeheartedly.

“You could have the best CNA course on the planet, but it wouldn’t compare to shadowing someone doing the job you’re trying to learn,” Prots said. “Until you start doing the job yourself by learning from a professional, you don’t have a clue what you’re getting into.”

While Prots’ career goal is to become a surgical technician, she wanted the experience of working with patients as a CNA in training to feel a more personal connection and understand the whole-patient experience.

“From the moment she saw the patients in Deer Ridge, she knew she wanted to help them,” Page said. “She was very engaged and wanted to help.”

Prots is in the Clover Park Community College Running Start program, earning college credit while still a high school student. After she earns her license as a certified nursing assistant, she plans to work as a CNA to gain more experience and help cover expenses.

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That exploration is just what Watson, a senior at Tacoma School of the Arts, wanted. She doesn’t know her exact job trajectory and is taking this opportunity to see what suits her.

“I didn’t know my career path before this CNA program, and I still don’t,” she said. “I just know I want to work with people. I know that being in nursing and helping people in a vulnerable time is part of that, so I’m feeling out health care to see what it’s like. Doing this clinical rotation at Good Sam was my favorite part. I had so many hands-on experiences, which I loved. It’s how I learn best. I see that the medical field is definitely a concrete option for me now.”

No matter where she lands, Watson’s experience is valuable, says TPS Next Move Internship program coordinator Brittany Skobel.

“So often, students finish high school and invest a ton of time and money into post-secondary education without any way to know if their career choice will work for them,” Skobel said. “We want students to have a firsthand experience in their chosen career before they graduate, so they can make sure it’s a good fit for them.”

No matter their long-term professional aspirations, both Watson and Prots said they will pursue their CNA certification exam soon so they can work in a healthcare facility in the near future.

“After this experience, I can’t see myself liking anything as much as I do the medical field,” Prots said.

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How it works: Next Move Nursing Career Launch Program timeline

- Fall semester junior year: Introduction to internship class in career awareness and preparation activities
- Spring semester of junior year: 90-hour unpaid internship in the healthcare field
- Summer after junior year: 90-hour CNA course, 40-hour CNA clinical program
- Fall semester of senior year: 90-hour paid internship in the healthcare field
- Spring Semester Senior Year: Prepare for post-high school education and training opportunities
How did we share this story?

- Hard copy “Spotlight” newsletter, mailed to all mail stops in school district boundary
- District website
- District eNewsletter
- District social media