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## Program benefits students with job search

By **LINDA TRIMBLE**

Education Writer

DAYTONA BEACH -- Donovan Stull already had a job when he earned a state certificate verifying he was "ready to work," but it still helped the Seabreeze High School senior qualify for more responsibility at the restaurant where he works.

Stull attributes that, in part, to what he learned through the Ready to Work program about setting priorities and meeting deadlines.

He took the online work skills assessment last year at Seabreeze, one of three area high schools recognized as "standouts" by the state for the number of credentials their students earned.

Flagler Palm Coast and Matanzas high schools also fell into that category, with Flagler and Volusia ranking among the top five Florida school districts for the number of students earning the certificates.

The Florida Legislature first funded the program -- already in place in more than 40 other states -- in 2006, with statewide implementation kicking off in the spring of 2007.

While schools have been early leaders in launching the program, the Center for Business Excellence will begin offering the assessment to adult job seekers in October at its One-Stop Career Centers in Daytona Beach and DeLand.

The program is based on computer-based courseware developed by ACT, sponsor of one of the nation's leading college admissions tests. After working through the courseware, participants take online tests in applied math, locating information and reading for information.

Upon completion, they earn a Ready to Work certificate signed by the governor that rates their knowledge at the gold, silver or bronze level. Optional assessments in such areas as work habits, teamwork and business writing also are available.

"It allows the employer to choose the right person out of a pool of candidates," said Kathy Fletcher, Ready to Work project coordinator for six counties including Volusia and Flagler.

With the Florida unemployment rate at its highest level in 13 years, Fletcher said the credential can be a valuable screening tool for employers who have multiple applicants for every job opening and help them "hire right the first time."

Fletcher has been working closely with area schools and businesses to get the program up and running. Volusia already has 22 Ready to Work assessment centers, mostly at schools and juvenile justice facilities, and Flagler has seven. Individual businesses also may apply to become assessment centers.

Jim Greer, a former banker who now teaches business education at Pine Ridge High School, said the program gives his students an advantage when they apply for a job.

"If it comes down to two people and my student has this credential and the other doesn't, I think that's the swing vote for them," he said.

Both local school districts started Ready to Work testing last year with students enrolled in certain career and technical education courses but plan to expand the program to more students.

"From what we understand, more employers are learning about it and willing to accept it as a credential, and they would be looking to hiring someone who has earned that credential as opposed to someone who has not," said Sue Nocella, career and technical education specialist for Flagler schools.

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