

# New program keeping at-risk teens in school

By Kathleen G. McWilliams

Journal Inquirer | Posted: Friday, September 11, 2015 12:24 pm

EAST HARTFORD — It's Thursday morning, and Patty Damiani and her high school students are discussing values.

“Not everyone need a high school diploma?” Damiani asks.

More than half of her small class walk over to a sign on the wall that says “disagree” while the rest of her students vacillate between signs that say “agree” and “unsure.”

When asked to defend their choice, students who agree say it is easier to get a job if you have a diploma, while the few who disagree say that some people get lucky and can be successful without a diploma.

This question is particularly meaningful to the students in Damiani's class, who are all part of a national program designed to help at-risk students get their high school diplomas — and a job after graduation.

Jobs for America's Graduates, a national effort that has been in Connecticut since January, targets students who might need help getting to graduation and teaches them the skills they need to pursue higher education or land a stable job after graduation.

At East Hartford High School, Damiani manages four classes — each with about a dozen students — in daily 45-minute lessons designed to get them thinking about professionalism, leadership, and self-development.

“It is proven that if you have a high school diploma you will make more money,” Damiani tells her students. “There are always exceptions, but it's not the norm. You will struggle if you don't get a diploma; it won't be easy.”

JAG was first started in Delaware 35 years ago and was so successful that it went nationwide. In January, JAG was implemented in six Connecticut schools, including schools in New Haven, New Britain, Manchester, and East Hartford.

Connecticut JAG Director Liz Dupont-Diehl said the main goal of the program is to not let students slip through the cracks.

“Job placement and support is integral to JAG,” Dupont-Diehl said.

JAG works with employers across the state to help students into jobs and Dupont-Diehl said this situation doesn't just benefit the students.

“Employers love JAG because we teach them all these great skills,” she said. “JAG doesn’t have a lot of book learning, it’s very experiential.”

For example, last spring during the program’s test run in Connecticut, Damiani’s students were tasked with planning a business. This required designing a logo, strategizing a hiring plan, and creating a dress code. Students then interviewed their classmates for the position, Dupont-Diehl said.

“Our specialists can be very creative with how they teach these competencies,” she said.

While creativity is an important part of the job, Dupont-Diehl said that being open and accessible is another, integral, part of being a JAG specialist.

“You get one adult who is a caring adult and she takes time with a reasonable cohort of kids,” Dupont-Diehl said. “She’s a one-on-one mentor as well as a counselor.”

While JAG is only in its beginning phases in East Hartford, Damiani has kept up with her students from last spring.

“They all graduated, which I’m very happy about,” Damiani said. “They’re doing well. The ones I know about are doing well.”

Out of Damiani’s roughly 40 students, many attended Manchester Community College, one went on to a four-year college program, and one went to a vocational program in Boston.

“That’s what this year is all about,” Damiani said. “Figuring it all out.”