



WeeCat Industries:

Educating the Future

By Patrick Cain



With an ever-growing demand for a skilled workforce, business and industry leaders are begging K–12 school systems to

begin educating students on employability skills prior to high school. The heart and true success of any career and technical education (CTE) program lies in its ability to prepare students for success, not only in a career field, but in life. An effort to foster the employability skills that students gain from participating in such programs is the driving force behind WeeCat Industries. In Enterprise City Schools, nestled inside a rural town in southeast Alabama, such principles as leadership, teamwork, critical thinking and positive work ethic transformed the instructional framework of WeeCats Preschool into the emerging WeeCat Industries, which meets the same standards of quality, productivity and financial performance as a real-world company.

Upon review of student outcomes related to workforce readiness, the Enterprise City Schools Special Projects Center determined the preschool setting presents the perfect opportunity to teach employability skills in conjunction with the instructional delivery of standards. WeeCat Industries embeds the Alabama Developmental Standards for Preschool Children (2013) for their three- and four-year-old special education and general education students, through the utilization of a simulated workplace and live work, into their daily curriculum and educational activities. Joylee Cain, special education director for Enterprise City Schools and chief executive officer for WeeCat Industries said, “We are educating the workforce of the future. It is essential to consider the voice of business and industry in planning for instructional delivery in the preschool setting, when the window to learning is optimal. The early acquisition of workplace skills can change a child’s trajectory in life.”

“WeeCat Industries puts employees in positions that will not only challenge them, but allow them to experience success in developmental areas that may not occur naturally in a traditional classroom setting.”

How It All Began

Deborah Owens, special education teacher and president of WeeCat Industries, attended the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) Transition Conference during the spring of 2017. There, Owens attended a session led by Josh Laney, senior director for workforce with the ALSDE, which dealt with the need for all students, especially students with special educational needs, to be a part of CTE programs that foster and promote the use of a simulated work-based learning environment.

It was this presentation that piqued Owens's interest in finding a way to better provide her pre-kindergarten students with a learning environment that was more engaging, more interactive and that would encompass and build upon the Alabama Developmental Standards for Preschool Children. “Individual differences should be recognized and respected in order to assist children in the learning process. Teachers need to be willing to provide a repertoire of strategies and alternative approaches to facilitate individual functional development” (“Alabama developmental,” 2013). Owens found those strategies and approaches within the development and implementation of a true simulated workplace that addresses the varying cognitive, and fine- and gross-motor skills for her students, WeeCat Industries.

Process, Development & Implementation

Owens and Cain, in collaboration with school and district personnel, utilized the Alabama Simulated Workplace Manual (2015) as their guide for the development and implementation of WeeCat Industries. Beginning with the end in mind, Owens knew that she had to find a way to incorporate the nine areas of development for her pre-kindergarten students as outlined in the Alabama Developmental Standards for Preschool Children (2013):

- Approaches to learning
- Language and literacy
- Mathematics
- Science

- Creative arts
- Technology
- Social and emotional development
- Physical development
- Health and daily living

One of the most effective ways to use these developmental standards is “to create the beginning of a continuum of learning that links early development to later success in school and life” (“Alabama developmental,” 2013).

Hire a workforce.

This process began with identification or “hiring” of the workforce. Owens's pre-kindergarten class is comprised of roughly 50 percent students with special educational needs (ranging from mild to severe cognitive developmental delays and/or mild to severe fine- and gross-motor skill developmental delays), where the other half develop typically.

Develop a company name.

The next step was to create a name for the company. Owens and partners decided that it was only fitting to name their company after the preschool, WeeCats. As a result, WeeCat Industries was born.

Develop organizational structures.

To effect an organizational structure and management systems (i.e., job descriptions, student portfolios, evaluation systems and service learning projects) was not an easy task. However, with lots of planning and forethought, Owens and Cain developed a rotational structure that afforded each of the employees an opportunity to work in various positions while ensuring that the tasks involved were within the scope of varying ability levels. In doing so, WeeCat Industries puts employees in positions that will not only challenge them, but allow them to experience success in developmental areas that may not occur naturally in a traditional classroom setting. Responsibilities and position titles include job foreman, quality control inspector, quality control inspector assistant, floor manager, assembly line operator, delivery

team, store clerk, inventory procurement specialist, clean-up crew and set-up.

Each employee utilizes a portfolio system to document learning, credentials earned and projects completed while at WeeCat Industries ("Alabama simulated," 2015). Employees receive payment for jobs well done and tasks completed in the form of WeeCat Bucks. Students can even earn bonuses for going above and beyond the expectations of their employers. The WeeCat Bucks can be used at the end of each work week to purchase items in the WeeCat Industries Company Store.

From this, the employees of WeeCat Industries begin learning the fundamentals of addition and subtraction. Employees know how much money an item in the WeeCat Industries Company Store cost and compare that amount to the amount of money they have earned for the week. Pre-kindergarten age students subtract those amounts and explain exactly how much more money they need to be able to buy an item and/or how much money they have left over after their purchase. Teaching addition and subtraction is not

part of the Alabama Developmental Standards for Preschool Children (2013), but proves how employees of WeeCat Industries are able to develop advanced skills beyond their age.

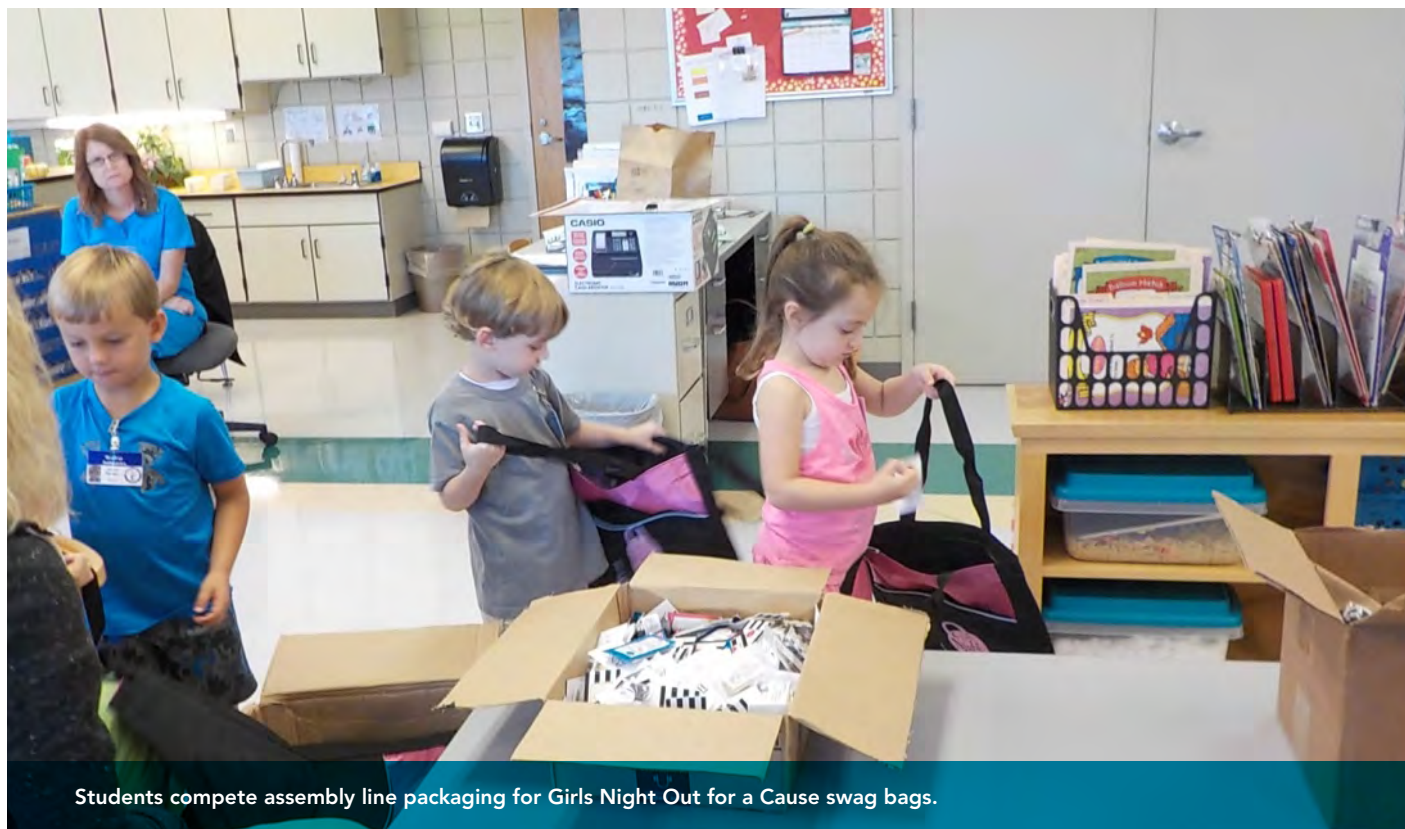
Develop company policies and procedures.

Each employee has an official WeeCat Industries' employee identification badge they are required to wear at all


times. In addition, they are assigned an employee number with which to clock in and out, using a number pad, during the designated work time. Not only are the students exposed to number recognition, memory recall and the use of fine motor skills, they are also able to generalize those skills within other areas of the school. Students' employee numbers are derived from pin numbers assigned by the Child Nutrition Program and used



Set-up crew organizes flyers and coupons for easy and efficient assembly of swag bags.



Students compete assembly line packaging for Girls Night Out for a Cause swag bags.



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in the school cafeteria for students to purchase breakfast and/or lunch. Their pin number is the same, year-after-year, for as long as the student remains enrolled at an Enterprise City school.

Pre-kindergarten students enrolled at WeeCat Industries learn, from the beginning of their tenure, that “punctual, regular attendance is an essential job function of every job and position, and employees are expected to report to work when scheduled to work and to remain at work each working day” (“Enterprise city,” 2016). WeeCat Industries mirrors the belief of Enterprise City Schools that appropriate appearance shall be in accordance with the high standards of their profession as outlined in the Enterprise City Schools Employee Handbook (“Enterprise city,” 2017); as such, employees are issued official WeeCat Industries shirts and must abide a specified employee dress code.

Safety policies and procedures are addressed during the first day of work and reviewed with employees on a regular basis. WeeCat Industries prides itself on a work area free of clutter and possible tripping hazards; and utilizes procedures set out by ServSafe for the safe handling of food and handwashing requirements. WeeCat Industries also posts adapted safety signs and procedures throughout their work areas, just as they would appear in an official business or industry.

Another area of particular focus for the employees of WeeCat Industries is quality control. The need for good quality control became particularly important during their first job when the WeeCats were tasked with filling snack orders. Employees were responsible for taking orders, organizing the snacks, placing requested snacks into bags, sealing the bags, delivering the snacks and invoicing the teacher. Not only was Owens able to teach her employees about shapes, colors, textures, counting, number and word recognition, and pre-hand writing skills, the natural opportunity to teach order, quantitative matching, team building and task completion added value.

“This was the first time in my career that I truly believed I was able to meet the needs of each and every one of my students all at the same time,” said Ow-

ens. “Not just meeting them where they were cognitively and physically, but challenging them on their individual levels.”

But, during snack time, some students complained that the snacks didn’t taste very good. The snacks were stale. This fact presented a teachable moment in which WeeCat Industries learned to distinguish quality. And a new position, quality control inspector, was created whose role it is to ensure every bag is closed completely. This position and responsibilities align with the job description and responsibility for a quality control manager outlined in the Alabama Simulated Workplace Manual. Due to increased volume and productivity, this position was expanded to include an assistant. Students get to interview for this position on a weekly basis, incorporating interview skills, dress code standards, introductions and participation in employee evaluations.

Working together as a team and building upon the strengths of others is at the forefront of what it truly means to be a WeeCat. Employees at WeeCat Industries are cognizant of the individual differences of their co-workers, and they use those differences to make their team stronger. It is their teamwork and genuine desire for all employees’ success that makes WeeCat Industries so successful. There is no recognition of the hierarchy of skills between employees. They see every contribution as progress toward their common goal to complete the project and meet the quota.

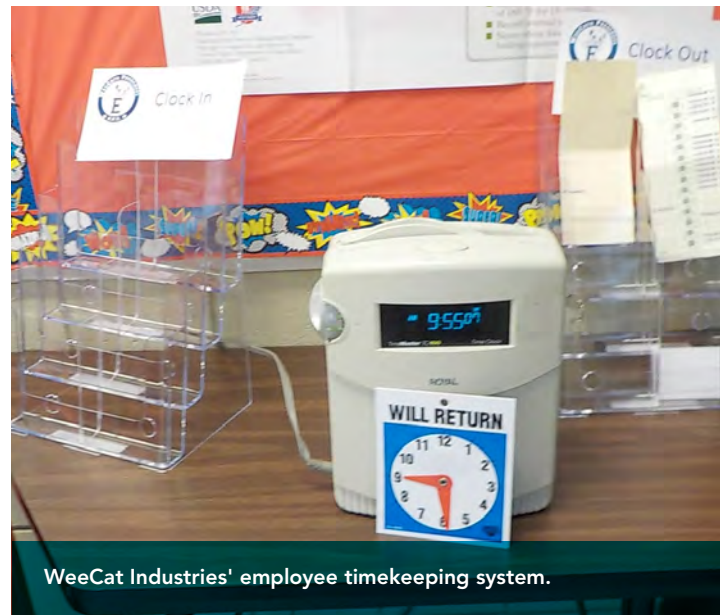
Live Work Opportunities

In addition to the development and successful implementation of a simulated workplace, WeeCat Industries has also engaged in live work opportunities for their employees. WeeCat Industries sorted, organized, filled, invoiced and delivered 400 swag bags for an annual charity event in downtown Enterprise. Employees were given a deadline to complete this task along with daily quotas that were to be met.

“This was a great opportunity to teach our students all about the letter ‘Q’. ‘Q’ is for quota is much more functional than ‘Q’ is for queen. [They learned] what sound it makes, how to write the letter, upper- and lowercase,



WeeCat employees complete invoices before products go to quality control inspector.



WeeCat Industries' employee timekeeping system.



Official WeeCat Industries employee identification badges.



WeeCat Industries' employees prepare snack bags, abiding by the ServSafe food handling procedures.

[and were encouraged to] come up with their own words that begin with the letter 'Q,' said Owens. "Our employees got so involved in this process that they didn't want to stop working each day. In fact, not a day went by that our employees did not exceed their daily quotas, which made it possible for the swag bags to be delivered ahead of schedule.

"Employees developed concepts of work-related vocabulary based on their hands-on experiences," Owens continued. "Match became sort; taking turns became assembly line; and treasure chest prize became bonus. One of the great and exciting things about utilizing live work opportunities is that these lessons and

teachable moments present themselves naturally. Their natural curiosity is driving our instruction." ■

Patrick M. Cain is an assistant superintendent with Enterprise City Schools. Email him at pcain@enterpriseschools.net.

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