

Jordan High School students in Long Beach get hands-on learning in ACE Academy program

By Phillip Zonkel, Staff Writer Long Beach Press Telegram

Posted:

PressTelegram.com

LONG BEACH - Jordan High School students Irving Galarza and Antonio Gonzalez are going back to school -- spending their summer vacation re-plastering the ceilings, painting the walls and replacing light fixtures at the old United Way building in Bixby Knolls.

It's all part of a work-based learning class with Jordan's Architecture, Construction and Engineering (A.C.E.) Academy, a program designed to prepare students for careers in those industries. It prepares students for a job after high school graduation and meets educational requirements to qualify for admission to a CSU or UC campus.

Galaraza and Gonzalez, both 16 years old and incoming juniors, are among 15 Jordan students renovating the rundown 9,000-square-foot facility, which houses several nonprofits and is run by the Long Beach Community Foundation. The facility should be finished by the end of August.

Mike Zeke, 66, a construction and drafting teacher at Jordan who works with the ACE Academy, is volunteering his time to teach the class.

"All of the renovation is done by the students on their own or with a journeyman," Zeke said. "Students can learn how to do something on a computer, but until they do it in the real world, they don't get it.

"This learning engages them. We want them to learn. Unless they see the connection to real life, they don't want to get involved."

Galaraza and Gonzalez agree. They enjoy taking the class because they take what they've learned in the classroom and apply it to the real world by refinishing the ceilings in the hallways, replacing about 40 wooden office doors with single-pane, opaque glass doors and remodeling the kitchen with bamboo floor and granite counter tops.

"I didn't want to stay home and do nothing during the summer. I wanted to learn something new," Galaraza said. "I want to work in construction after I graduate high school."

"I wanted to learn at an actual job site," Gonzalez said. "Some people learn from books and tests, but I learn better when I'm actually doing it."

Students more likely to succeed

Those beliefs were confirmed in a 2011-2012 state report from State Superintendent Tom Torlakson. Students enrolled in California Partnership Academies, such as the A.C.E. Academy, are more likely to graduate from high school and complete courses required to attend the state's public universities, the report said.

The A.C.E Academy, a collaboration among the City of Long Beach, the Long Beach Unified School District and private trade industries, was launched in 2007 after Mayor Bob Foster was inspired by the

San Diego Construction Tech Academy. That program had a 100 percent passage rate on the 2006 high school exit exam.

An advisory committee of representatives from labor unions, LBUSD, city government and business and industry works with the program.

The district used \$180,000 in federal funds to purchase equipment, supplies, software, a curriculum and other items.

Since 2007, The Long Beach Community Foundation has given more than \$200,000 to the A.C.E. Academy. When the foundation decided to renovate the former United Way building, which had been a state of disrepair for a long time, members contacted the A.C.E. Academy.

"We were familiar with their work, but didn't know if they could handle it," said Julie Heggeness, Long Beach Community Foundation vice president. "There was a lot of complicated work to do, replacing the doors, installing light fixtures, but it was a perfect fit. They're learning skills and doing work."

In 2011, the A.C.E. Academy received the Linked Learning Certification from ConnectED, a California nonprofit advocating career education.

ConnectED recognizes programs that prepare students for both higher education and the workforce by offering career education along with the academic course work needed for college admission.

After reviewing the A.C.E. Academy, the nonprofit reported that the program offers a well-designed curriculum, enthusiastic and collaborative teachers and a personalized learning environment.

More help for students

But the A.C.E. Academy isn't the only program of its kind in Long Beach. Others include Poly High School's Pacific Rim Academy and Jordan's Aspirations in Medical Services Academy.

In addition, the district's \$75.5 million Ernest S. McBride Sr. High School in East Long Beach, which opens Sept. 5, offers several programs tied to three career pathways: health/medical, law enforcement/legal services and engineering. It will open with 210 ninth graders, who already have been chosen. With new incoming ninth grade classes each subsequent year, McBride will have 1,080 students by the fall 2016.

Statewide, 481 California Partnership Academies exist, enrolling 58,200 students in grades 10-12, or 3.96 percent of the student population, according a 2011-2012 report from the California Department of Education.

Back at the A.C.E. class, Galarza says he's already applying his knowledge to his life.

"I'm starting to fix some things around my house," he said. "I don't have to call someone, so I'm also saving that money."

Contact Phillip Zonkel at 562-714-2098

phllip.zonkel@presstelegram.com

@zonkelpt on Twitter