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SAHS partners with global tech company for pilot internship program for students with autism

Pilot internship program offered for students with autism

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FRANCONIA >> Autistic students at Souderton Area High School are getting a taste of the working world through a new pilot mentorship program offered by the global company Systems Applications and Products in Data Processing, known as SAP.

“It is a win-win, because we get really great talent,” José Velasco, the head of SAP’s Autism at Work program in the U.S., said Monday. “For me it is satisfying identifying talent that adds value to our company. To see that talent walk through the doors every day provides me with great levels of satisfaction.”

SAP and Souderton Area High School joined forces in October to create a new high school mentorship pilot program under the company’s Autism at Work initiative. In 2013, SAP partnered with Specialisterne, a company that works to find jobs for high-functioning people with autism, Velasco said.

Since the partnership, SAP has hired 94 people with autism globally in 14 different areas, including software testers, programmers and data quality assurance specialists. SAP aims to hire 100 employees that are on the spectrum by the end of the year, Velasco said.

The pilot program mirrors the Autism at Work program, as well as another high school mentorship program that comes out of the company’s Corporate Social Responsibility department, Peggy Monaghan, a SAP employee and a volunteer with the pilot program, said.

There are approximately 55 students at Souderton Area High School diagnosed with autism, Principal Sam Varano said. Four junior students, who have autism and are college-bound, were selected by teachers to participate in the pilot program, district Gifted Services Coordinator Cheryle Radcliff said.

“These are students with high academic ability we felt had the career-readiness they needed to go into this environment and work with adults,” she said. “They are being asked to give eye contact, talk to strangers – they are being challenged. They are also being asked to interface with people first hand. This is a tremendous opportunity for them.”

The program, which has two components, is slated to run through June. The first component is a once-a-month, three-hour in person mentorship experience where students visit SAP’s U.S. headquarters in Newtown Square and learn about projects employees are working on, have lunch with the workers and conclude their visit by shadowing the employees for an hour, explained Monaghan. Through the iCouldBe mentorship software, students continue with the pilot virtually between their visits to the SAP offices, she said.

According to 2014 data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in 68 people are identified with autism, which is a developmental disorder that impairs a person's ability to communicate and interact. This is a projected 30 percent increase from 2012 data that reported one in 88 children have the condition.

Some people with autism tend to be loyal, have a strong work ethic, are transparent communicators, have good memories and have a strong ability to focus and pay close attention to detail in the areas of their interest, which are qualities SAP looks for when hiring future employees, Velasco said.

Superintendent Frank Gallagher spoke highly of the pilot program, praising SAP for being inclusive and accepting, stating he hopes this will be the beginning of a long partnership.

"I truly believe these students have a lot to add to our world and I'm thrilled to see a company that is recognizing that and really doing something about it," Radcliff said. "This is not a community service project for SAP. This is a commitment to hire talent and continue to be a leading innovator. Out of that desire and mission they believe in diversity – they recognize this is a group of people that can't be missed."

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