

# School District Prepares Special Education Students for Careers



Berkshire Union Free School District engages Cisco Networking Academy to train and certify students with technology.

## Executive Summary

### Berkshire Union Free School District

- **Industry:** K-12 Education; Special Education
- **Location:** Canaan, NY
- **Number of Employees:** 65

### CHALLENGE

- Offer education alternatives for at-risk high school students
- Train special education students with technology
- Improve graduation rates and entry-level job acceptance for special education students

### SOLUTION

- Invested in teacher training to introduce new IT courses
- Used IT training program to certify students
- Supplemented traditional education with real-life job training

### RESULTS

- Achieved 100 percent graduation rate within networking program
- Attained 85 percent pass rate on online exams within networking program
- Developed new opportunities to expand program's reach and scope

## Challenge

The state of New York faces a challenge when it comes to special education in high school. Across the state, the graduation rate for special needs students is currently less than 45 percent. In Berkshire Union Free School District (Berkshire UFSD) in Canaan, New York, the situation is more dire. This district faces poverty rates of over 90 percent, and over 85 percent of students in the district have special needs. Not a typical school district, Berkshire UFSD focuses on preparing learners for college and careers, a future not possible in their previous learning environment.

As a public school, Berkshire UFSD serves young men 12 to 18 years of age who are emotionally or learning disabled as classified through the Committee on Special Education (CSE). Students placed at Berkshire UFSD by a local district have been unsuccessful in their community schools due to the effects of poverty and a failed school experience. For Berkshire UFSD, the mission is clear: to provide a diversified and quality educational program, which will help students graduate from high school and return to their communities as contributing and successful members of society.

Though Berkshire UFSD provides a high level of care for its at-risk youth, it has the same accountability as other public school systems, which means despite the challenges its students have faced, it is held to the same goals of retention and graduation. As such, in 2009, Berkshire UFSD partnered with Berkshire Farm Center and Services for Youth to launch the Twombly Leadership Academy. Considered a top Committee on Special Education (CSE) Residential School in New York State, the Twombly Leadership Academy provides selected students with specialized educational services, workforce development experience, and trauma-focused therapies.

“To make a meaningful impact in New York, we needed to create a workforce program that focused on results,” says Tim Giacchetta, chief executive officer of Berkshire Farm Center and the president of Berkshire UFSD’s Board of Education. “Our challenge and mission was to incorporate the state’s Top 10 Workforce Readiness Skills into a workforce development program, ensuring that students graduate with a high school diploma and have the skills they need to be college and career ready.”

To bolster the impact of Berkshire’s Workforce Development Program, in 2012, Berkshire invested in a strategy to build a more competitive and effective 21st century learning program. The district’s superintendent, Bruce Potter, participated in multiple corporate learning events focused on Teaching for the 21st Century (T-21) and the necessary skills that high school students need to be competitive in the workplace environment.

After a year of research, Berkshire UFSD representatives synched with Cisco team members at a New York state event focused on college and career readiness. At the conference, Cisco and Berkshire UFSD representatives discussed the potential opportunities of the Cisco® Networking Academy (Networking Academy). As the largest Cisco corporate social responsibility (CSR) program, the Networking Academy partners with organizations to provide a blended e-learning environment to meet students’ digital learning needs. After subsequent meetings, Berkshire UFSD realized Cisco was the perfect partner.

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**Tim Giacchetta**, Chief Executive Officer; President of the Berkshire UFSD School Board, Berkshire Farm Center; Berkshire Union Free School District School Board

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**Bruce Potter**, Superintendent, Berkshire Union Free School District

## Solution

For Berkshire UFSD, the Networking Academy offered the opportunity to open doors and certify the school district in ways that were not possible before. “Right from the start, the Networking Academy brought the possibility to certify our students and make them employable, increasing Berkshire’s impact in the state and beyond,” says Potter. “These essential skills not only help with employment, but with highly valuable and sought-after career certifications.”

To begin the process of integrating with the Networking Academy, Berkshire UFSD had to prepare its teachers. Because of the types of students that the district serves, teacher training involved more complex and delicate tactics than non-special education training. The first step was a week-long training during the summer of 2013. Through the process, teachers became heavily involved with online feedback and support, in addition to receiving a multitude of materials to get started.

The next step in program development was getting students on-board. Teachers at Berkshire UFSD evaluated 35 students within the Twombly Leadership Academy and began with a core group of seven young men whose interests, profiles, and skill sets were the appropriate match for the program. A guidance counselor at the school met with the seven students extensively, and following those discussions, a cohort was developed. “Berkshire UFSD already has a rich technological environment,” says Potter. “The Networking Academy aids us in matching our resources with a rigorous curriculum that helps us follow T-21.”

At the onset of the program in the fall of 2013, Berkshire UFSD began collaborating with the Networking Academy to teach the first of a series of courses that are offered at both district high and neighboring community colleges. The goal of the first course was to have students pass the ComTIA A+ certification exams, which are the starting point for a career in information technology (IT). “The best part about the Networking Academy is that Cisco provides not only the course material, but connects it to an authentic experience,” says Potter.

As a part of the learning experience, Networking Academy students were given on-campus job opportunities with Berkshire UFSD’s IT department. “Workforce training motivates students beyond the classroom walls and helps them to become successful members of society,” says Paul Roney, vice president of Information Technology at Berkshire Farm Center. “Creating authentic work for students through our helpdesk is not only a fulfilling experience, but one with long-term impact.”

## Results

Since its installation in September 2013, Berkshire UFSD is pleased to report that 100 percent of Networking Academy students have achieved a passing grade in the IT Essentials course. “IT is a tough field for any learner, and we see our students pushing against extremes,” says Dan Horst, a Networking Academy teacher certified

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## Product List

- Cisco Networking Academy

in math and special education at Berkshire UFSD. “That being said, the process is also exhilarating; we get to watch transformations every day that will carry students through high school and beyond.”

One example of success within the program is a student who began with a limited amount of computing knowledge. Prior to transferring schools, this student’s history was plagued with chronic under-performance and intense emotional issues. With the hands-on experience that the Networking Academy provided, this student was able to assemble a computer using new parts in boxes in less than 30 minutes.

As a result of its achievements, Berkshire UFSD is now facing a better challenge: the demand for the program exceeds the availability. Many students and their families have shown interest since the course’s debut, and with continued support from the community, the school district hopes to expand the scope and reach of the program beyond its current capacity.

“Based on the significant progress that our at-risk students have achieved, our goal is to expand the Networking Academy across the region, giving more students the opportunity to become college and career ready in the emerging field of technology,” says Horst.

## Next Steps

Looking toward 2014, Berkshire UFSD is preparing to open additional sections of the Cisco IT Essentials course as well as offer the next level of networking courses in response to growing interest among students.

Plans are being laid to train additional faculty members and to develop partnerships with existing Cisco Networking Academies in community colleges across the state. The school district is also opening a satellite location in January 2014. Focused on alternative transition programs, which cater to 16 year-old students at risk of drop-out, this site will offer a day program for troubled learners and connect to both a regional program and a GED preparatory program.

“We learn every day from our challenges and our successes,” says Potter. “The Cisco Networking Academy has given us one more tool to assist our students in becoming contributing members of society.”

## For More Information

To learn more about the Cisco Networking Academy, go to <http://www.cisco.com/web/learning/netacad/index.html>.

