When you meet 17-year-old Taylor High School Senior Matthew Jackson you know right away that he is a young man who is focused on getting things done and moving ahead in life. He is a second year member of Amy Campbell’s Work Based Learning (WBL) Program and has earned the respect of the managers at many off campus community training sites. Job Coaches, Amy White and Rossana Jennings, said that Matthew is adept at learning what needs to be done and then doing it with precision and accuracy. White and Jennings hope that Matthew will get job offers from several of his training sites when he graduates.

Matthew’s plans after graduation include culinary arts school and training to become a chef. Matthew is a young man with a friendly smile who loves to cook his own pizza at home and hang out with his family. Matthew and his family moved from Chicago, Illinois two years ago. He said, “I like our warmer Katy winters but I do miss the snow sometimes.” Matthew is excited that his 75 year old grandmother and his adult sister from Chicago are both planning to visit Katy in the next few weeks. When asked what his favorite academic subject is, Matthew is quick to tell you he loves Math.

When asked what WBL has helped him learn Matthew does not hesitate to say “Never give up, never give up!” He thinks WBL has helped him become a creative problem solver who is able to adapt to different situations at his training sites. He and his classmates are also working on a “Making a Difference” project that awards the class a sticker for every positive action or verbal interaction with others. The administrative staff at THS say that when the class has earned enough stickers to cover the entire poster board the students will earn a reward. The whole WBL class at THS is very positive so it shouldn’t take them long to accomplish this goal.

Matthew is a dedicated young man who knows what he wants to do in life and is taking the time to build the right supports by mastering both academic subjects and on-the-job career skills. He has a bright future and says that he is proud to be a member of the THS WBL program.
What’s New at Seven Lakes High School!

Shannon Womack has taught in special education for twenty-three years. Twenty of those years have been spent teaching students with an intellectual disability. Womack’s passion for teaching began when she was a student at Stephen F. Austin State University: one class in generic special education and a trip to the Lufkin State School and she was hooked. Womack has been a LIFE Skills teacher at Seven Lakes High School for about 10 years and has long expressed an interest in creating a classroom that focuses on vocational training where students would create products and or provide a service to the community; therefore it was not a surprise when she approached Principal Ted Vierling and the Special Education Department Chair, Cheryl Raschilla with the idea of a vocational LIFE Skills classroom at SLHS. Womack described a classroom that would primarily focus on vocational training for students who have met their graduation credit requirements, but continued to demonstrate a need for vocational education training that could not be met on community training sites. In the spring of 2014, Raschilla and Womack applied for and were recipients of a Katy ISD Foundation Grant and the entrepreneur vocational classroom was born. Students attending class with Womack use their individual talents to create projects that are sold to SLHS faculty and the community at large. The students are learning preliminary skills that would allow them to pursue individual entrepreneur opportunities with the support of family and friends. This school year, students began by creating spirit, collegiate and holiday wreaths that were customized by order. The wreaths are painted and assembled by students with minimal assistance from staff. No one could have predicted the huge success of the wreath project. To date, approximately 146 wreaths have been sold. Other projects include making dog treats for the national Walk Your Dog Week, and holiday and note cards designed by the students. The students are preparing for a December craft sale that will feature ornaments and coasters. All craft projects are created by the students with minimal assistance from the classroom staff and the proceeds are used to fund the classroom projects. Some services include daily campus print shop deliveries and updating magazine subscriptions in the campus library. The next project in the making is the “Sparbucks” coffee sales to SLHS Spartan staff—one that is sure to be a hit! The entrepreneur vocational classroom has received 100% support from the student’s parents and staff at SLHS. A true measure that “What’s new at SLHS” is sure to be a success!
Erin Tristan

“Writing is an artistry and I want my students to see it as a way to express themselves,” said Erin Tristan, Beckendorff Junior High Resource Reading and Language Arts teacher. Tristan is a brand new teacher to Katy ISD and to the field of teaching. Her passion for teaching and special education comes from her personal history with a family member who has a disability. “I played a major role in attending ARDS and volunteering at camps. While volunteering, I was inspired by those individuals and their determination to be successful. They truly overcame many struggles and I felt grateful to be a part of that journey,” Tristan said.

Tristan was born in Louisiana and later moved with family to Katy where she attended Taylor High School. After she finished high school, she studied to be a nurse. Tristan became interested in traveling and began to study abroad but later finished her degree in business. She began working in oil and gas as a safety engineer. She worked there for seven years training adults on safety procedures. During this time, Tristan recognized her passion for teaching and moved into education. “I want to prepare students for after school so they can continue to be successful. With this in mind, I try to bring real life experiences and skills into the classroom as much as I can,” said Tristan. Tristan has already begun to see successes in her students through their writing. “I started off only getting a few sentences from some of the students and recently I had them delivering presentations to an entire class. It feels amazing to see how excited they are to come to class and be proud of their work,” Tristan said.

Tristan has many interests and passions outside of the classroom. She spends a large part of her time with her family and two daughters, ages 5 and 2. Tristan leads her daughters’ Girl Scout Troop and is an avid softball and soccer mom. She also volunteers for commissions in the city of Fulshear, CCR neighborhood events committee member, a volunteer for various local organizations, and is a CPR/First Aid Instructor. When she has some free time, Tristan travels, gardens, and sews.

Cathy Hart

When Cathy Hart relocated to Katy as a retail manager of a computer software company, she had no idea that she would spend the next 16 years teaching special education. Hart entered the Region 4 Alternative Certification program and was later hired at Taylor High School in the LIFE Skills program. She also taught Resource and In-Class-Support and became the Special Education Department Chair. After moving to Tompkins High School, Hart continued as Department Chair.

Hart thinks about all students when she is teaching. “It’s not just my students who are struggling,” she said. “We need to reach everyone.” Finding ways to reach students is very important to Hart. “Kids don’t all learn the same way,” she said. “You can’t force a kid into learning the way you teach.” Hart stays busy both in school and out. She has a son who is graduating from college and will begin his master’s program soon. She also has “2.5 dogs” (one is a “grand-dog”) and a cat. In February, Hart plans on running in the Katy Half Marathon. Hart also enjoys reading and tries to read all of the novels that her students are reading.
**Dr. Kris Mitzner**

Diane Winborn elementary is “creating a culture of success and continuous improvement,” said DWE principal, Dr. Kris Mitzner. “We look at strengths first,” she added. “The whole school is focused on that with everyone. Everybody has value.”

Mitzner has applied her love of technology to her role as educational leader on her campus. “Technology can transform learning and meet individual needs. An iPad can level the playing field.” She added, “It’s not about the device. It’s about learning.”

Mitzner, a Texas A&M graduate, always wanted to be a teacher. She began her career in 1993 at Fielder elementary teaching 4th grade. After completing her PhD research in cyber bullying, Mitzner decided to return to the classroom. She purposefully chose 3rd grade, as those students had been exposed to the internet their entire lives. In 2012, she accepted the principal position at DWE.

What Mitzner loves most about DWE is the inclusive environment. “We value everyone and their contributions.”

“If I hadn’t been an educator, I would have been a chef,” Mitzner said. ‘I love to cook!’ Along with that comes exercising, yoga, swimming and walking. “I am a voracious reader,” she added. Mitzner always has three books going at the same time: a children’s book, a fiction novel and a book addressing professional learning.

**Donna Chaney**

When it comes to serving students with special needs, Donna Chaney sees being an advocate for students as key. For Chaney, supporting and building relationships with students is an important role as a special education teacher in order to help her students reach their fullest potential; however she notes that the success of her students is undoubtedly a team effort. Chaney explains that the teachers, paraprofessionals and administrators at Nottingham Country Elementary are incredibly supportive. “I truly couldn’t do it without them! We are like one happy family,” Chaney said.

From an early age, she became interested in teaching children with special needs. When she was in kindergarten, she recalls seeing kids with special needs segregated to the back of the school. That moment in kindergarten stuck with her throughout her life. Chaney majored in Clinical Psychology then took a job in oil and gas. She got her alternative certification and taught in a LIFE Skills classroom at a technical high school in Houston ISD for two years before coming to Katy ISD 13 years ago.

Chaney also takes on the role of the Special Education Team Leader. With almost 20 special education teachers and paras on her campus, she explains that her role, as team leader, is to facilitate the communication amongst both general and special education teachers, paras, and administration. She collaborates with the teachers to look at the best ways to challenge students in order for them to be as independent as possible. She also continues to work alongside her team as an advocate for inclusive practices.

Balancing work and home life is important to Chaney. She has two daughters and loves taking them to amusement parks, the beach and fishing. As far as her passion for helping all kids, Chaney says that it’s all about “meeting needs and helping students reach their fullest potential.”
Katy Independent School District, the leader in educational excellence, together with family and community, provides unparalleled learning experiences designed to prepare and inspire each student to live an honorable, fulfilling life...to create the future.

Katy Independent School District Department of Special Education

Mission Statement
The Special Education Department exists to provide leadership and service to equip campuses with knowledge and skills in order for students to create their own future success.

Department Values
Excellence
Service to Campuses
Students as Individuals
Teamwork and Collaboration
Importance of Servanthood and Leadership