



Square One, Putnam Vocational Technical Academy prepare students for child-care careers

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07/31/13 Springfield- Republican Photo by Mark M.Murray - TD Charitable Foundation presented a check for \$ 10,000 to Square One to be used to provide fulltime employment for 15 students enrolled in the Putnam Vocational Technical Academy's Early Education and Care Track. From left to right, Joan Kagan, President and CEO of Square One, Larisa Polk, and Nas-ir Smith, both students at Putnam, Christine Abramowitz, Director of Planning and Systems Administration at the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County, administrators of the Youthworks program , and Jennifer Gabriel, TD Bank, Vice President Community Relations Manager .The check was presented during a ceremony at the Square One Children's Center at 255 King Street in Springfield. *(Mark M. Murray/ The Republican)*

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on August 05, 2013 at 6:08 AM, updated August 05, 2013 at 6:14 AM

SPRINGFIELD - Larisa A. Polk first came to **Square One's** Children's Center at 255 King St., as a 2-year-old, excited to play games and learn with her pre-school classmates.

Today, Polk is 17 and a soon-to-be senior at Putnam Vocational Technical Academy. She's still excited to go to the King Street Center, but now she's the one setting up the games and teaching the songs.

Polk is among 15 early education and care students from Putnam Vocational Technical Academy working summer jobs for Square One.

"I just love being with the children, playing with them, singing songs with them," she said. "It's fun watching them learn."

Sixteen-year-old Nasi'ir K. Smith, who will be a junior at Putnam this fall, is one of just a few young men in the program. He hopes to use his training to further his education and become a child psychologist.

The students' work was highlighted last week at a news conference to announce \$20,000 in funding for the summer job program, including \$10,000 from the TD Charitable Foundation and \$10,000 in state money funneled through the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County. The regional employment board sponsors programs to provide summer jobs to eligible young people.

"A lot of the summer jobs that we had as kids are not there anymore," said Shelly R. Brown, a teacher in the early childhood program at Putnam. "My students want to work. And, this gives them the experience they need."

For the past four years, students from Putnam's early childhood education program have spent their "shop week" during the school year at the King Street Center, said Joan B. Kagan, president and chief executive officer of Square One. Putnam students alternate a week of traditional academics with a week in the career shop of their choice.

The summer job program lets them continue their education in the summer while earning \$8.25 an hour.

Brown said Putnam's program provides its graduates with a state certification in addition to a high school diploma. This means they are qualified to be a teacher in an early-childhood setting.

"Job prospects are excellent," said Tommie L. Johnson, the center director. "Families have to work. Parents have to go out and do what it takes to make ends meet."

This creates a need for child-care professionals who engage and educate, she said. It takes a professional to teach skills like cooperation, taking turns as well as basic math and language skills that prepare a young child for school, Johnson added.

"Play," Johnson said. "Children learn through play."

Kagan said Square One is always looking for qualified teachers to hire and also works to put Putnam students in touch with other day-care and early childhood education agencies with job opportunities.

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