



## Mainland Regional High School

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### **New Jersey School Serving Students With Disabilities Gives DAW Endorsement to Local Company**

As the School-to-Work Coordinator for special needs and at-risk students at Mainland Regional High School, Special Education Teacher John Capasso is constantly on the lookout for business partners in the community who can help him get his students ready for the demands of the 21st Century workplace. Whether it's giving his students a paying job or simply a chance to explore career options by following a worker around for a day or two to see what the job is all about, Capasso knows businesses providing 'real world' experience are a key to engaging his students, in school and out.



MRHS Teacher John Capasso presents Disabilities At Work Letter of Endorsement to Fitzpatrick's Deli manager Tina Klain. Looking on ( l to r ) are Patty Guernaccini, Stephanie Donovan, Sara Cochrane, Patty Long, and Karen Searle.

But given the barriers his students often face, as well as the current state of the economy, his task is not an easy one. "This year, it's been a challenge to find companies that will even take volunteers, students who just want an unpaid learning experience," he says.

Capasso's job may have gotten a little bit easier thanks to a new initiative by the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce Foundation called Disabilities At Work. The program provides opportunities for businesses to acquire and display a visible symbol of their support for people with disabilities, and, as a result, the potential for increased customer patronage.

According to the Chamber's web site, [disabilitiesatwork.org](http://disabilitiesatwork.org), people with disabilities, their family members, service providers and other supporters are the largest minority group in the country. Together they control more than \$200 billion dollars in disposable income – an amount that exceeds that of the highly coveted teen market. Disabilities At Work (DAW) converts this latent consumer power into a focused ongoing campaign that will reward businesses that support people with disabilities. Service providers and other organizations that work with, or on behalf of, people with disabilities, can register to become DAW agencies and as Registered Agencies will have the right to endorse businesses that they know support people with disabilities, Capasso explained. "By leveraging the buying power of people with disabilities, their families, and supporters, schools and other agencies can now offer businesses something tangible in return for working with us."

Capasso first learned of the initiative at a chamber sponsored seminar he attended in December. “It was still in the formative stage, but they notified me in March when the program came on line. Mainland signed up as registered agency because I saw the potential for acquiring business partners for my work program.”

Mainland recently endorsed its first local business, Fitzpatrick’s Jewish Style Deli in Somers Point and owner Bill Hurst. “Bill and his entire staff have been terrific. He’s given tours of the deli to over 20 of my students, showing them step-by-step, what happens from the moment a waitress takes an order to the moment a customer receives their meal. He explained the various jobs and what you need to know to do each one. He and his manager, Tina, told the students what they expect of new employees. They have taken in several of my students to let them experience first-hand what it is to be a dishwasher, bus person, and hostess. Bill has offered to continue to work with our program; so there’s no question that Fitzpatrick’s has earned the right to display the DAW logo.”

Capasso says he hopes Disabilities At Work will make it easier to establish new partnerships with the business community, and to keep the partnerships he already has. “I hope the disability community throughout New Jersey embraces the program and it continues to grow. This is a win-win situation for all concerned. My students get the experience they need to help them grow; the disability community focuses its economic power where it does the most good; and businesses get a block of loyal customers.”