



Steele students learn career-focused software skills

MICROSOFT OFFICE CERTIFICATION PROVIDES TOOLS FOR MANY PATHS

By Anthony Tosie

anthony.tosie@nisdtx.org

With technology becoming a rapidly growing aspect of all jobs, working with computers is a necessity in most industries.

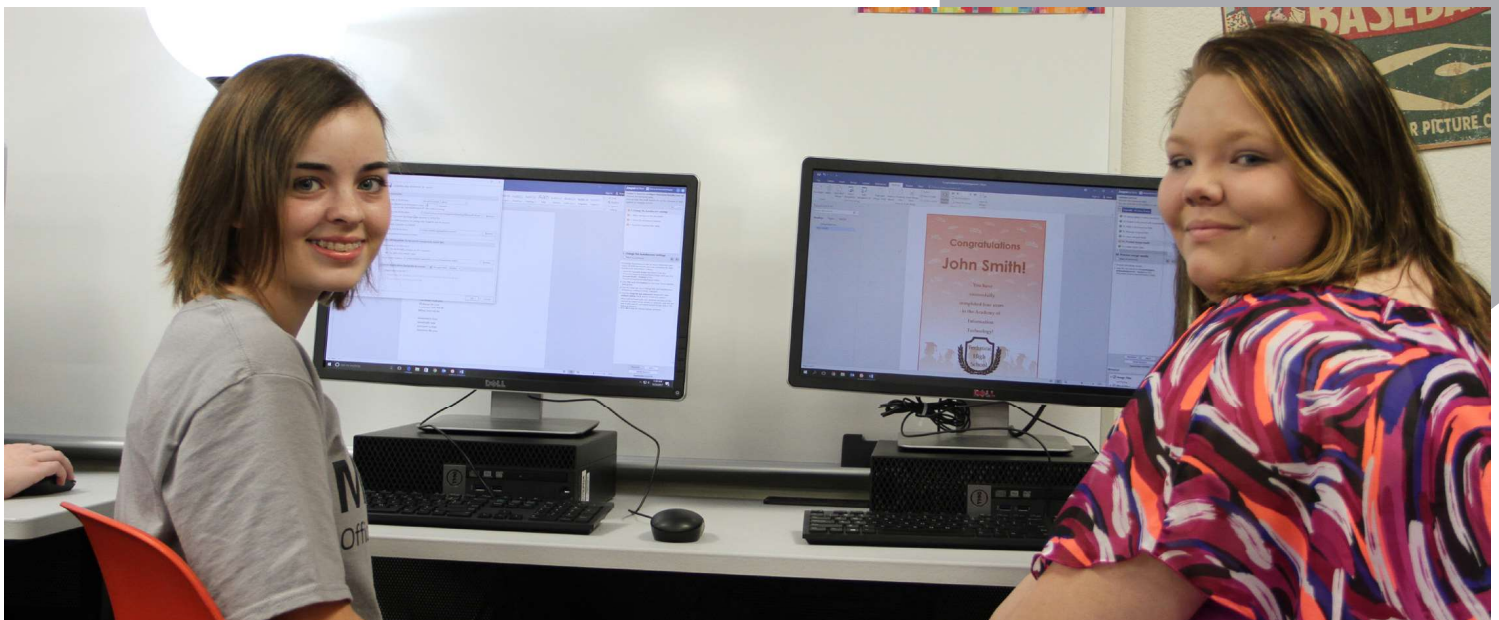
To meet the needs of technology literacy requirements in the workforce, Northwest ISD high schools allow students to earn certificates in leading Microsoft Office applications as well as other software. At Steele Accelerated High School, Patti Hayes' classes have met the challenges of certification in stride, with some students earning the distinguished title of "Microsoft Master."

In Ms. Hayes' classes – as well as many similar classes at the district's other high schools – students learn at their own pace, with an online service called Jasperactive allowing them to progress, so long as they hit certain key points.

"The system is about personalized learning for students, so they can move at a pace that suits them – if you look around, no screen is the same," she explained. "It makes it a little crazy at times, but not everyone works at the same speed. It makes overseeing things a little crazy at times, but it's always amazing to see what each student can accomplish."

In Microsoft Office classes, students can earn certifications in each of the software suite's individual programs: Access, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook and Word. That certification status – recognized by Microsoft itself – is earned directly at the school, as Steele and other Northwest ISD high schools are designated testing centers through Certiport.

The certifications also require intricate knowledge of the



programs, such as using pivot charts and tables in Excel. With pivot charts and tables, Excel users can link to external data sources and analyze vast amounts of information. While a regular user wouldn't use these features, many businesses use them to monitor company data, such as sales patterns, managed in different software.

If a student earns enough experience in four of the suite's programs (Excel, PowerPoint and Word, then either Access or Outlook), he or she receives the title of "Microsoft Master." Beginning this year, that designation – as well as other Microsoft Office certification designations – will show up on a Northwest ISD student's high school transcript.

Current students in Ms. Hayes' classes said the option of earning a Microsoft Office certification gives them practical experience with computers in ways that mirror the work done in a job.

"I took this course to help me in my future career field," said Bergan Conner, a Steele junior. "Because no matter what route I'm going, whether it's something directly about technology or not, I'm going to need to be able to work my way around computers. When we started this course, I thought it'd be easy since I've been using programs like PowerPoint almost my whole life, but I learned there were so many things I didn't know how to do."

Adia Compton, a senior at Steele, said the class has practical purposes that will assist her as an author.

"I want to be an author when I grow up, so I'm obviously going to need to type out all my books, so now I know how to properly format them before sending to publishers so they'll be more readable," she said. "I didn't realize headings would help me out so much by automatically creating my table of contents when I use them, for instance. So instead of searching for a chapter, I can just click it in the table of contents and immediately be there."

“*No matter what route I'm going, whether it's something directly about technology or not, I'm going to need to be able to work my way around computers.*”

– Bergan Conner, Steele junior

A student who wants to be a museum curator said learning Outlook features was extremely beneficial, as it helped her schedule her day and see when conflicts may arise. She also noted that she could send out a poll directly through Outlook to survey coworkers on options, a feature she didn't even know existed before taking the class.

An added benefit of earning certification, students agreed, is that they also receive badges they can place on their online portfolios. Northwest ISD students across the district create online portfolios in various classes, providing them with a starting point for their career endeavors.

Ms. Hayes said that's the ultimate goal of the class: To focus on what the students need to be prepared for whatever path they take after high school.

"The way I look at it is that, credit-wise, a lot of students don't need to take this class, so it's more about getting a competitive advantage when they graduate," Ms. Hayes said. "It's less about the grades and more about learning the particular applications and being able to put that on their résumés." ■