

The Augusta Chronicle

Luncheon honors students with disabilities

By Doug Stutsman

Posted Apr 12, 2017 at 1:50 PM

In 2004, the Augusta Area High School High Tech Program began with four students in Richmond County.

Now, it's the largest tech program in Georgia. On Wednesday, more than 280 students were recognized during the annual awards luncheon at the Augusta Marriott and Convention Center.

"We're so proud of these students," said Karen Royston, executive director of the Georgia committee on employment of people with disabilities. "Our goal is to make students with disabilities more prepared for life after high school. That's what we do."

The program is a community-based initiative providing high school juniors and seniors who have disabilities a link to academic and career-development experiences, enabling them to meet the workforce demands of the 21st century.

The Augusta Area High School High Tech Program provides many transition services for youths interested in work or post-secondary education. It also sponsors a competition for students to be awarded laptop computers to assist them in post-secondary education or in their employment.

"I'm most proud of the graduation rate for students in this program," Royston said. "Students with disabilities are twice as likely to drop out of high school compared to students without disabilities. However, in the Georgia High School High Tech Program, we have an 89-percent statewide graduation rate. In the Augusta area, that graduation rate is 95 percent."

In 2004, what began with four students in Richmond County has now expanded to five counties (McDuffie, Burke, Columbia, Richmond and Wilkes) and 17 area high schools.

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At Wednesday's luncheon, nine local students shared stories about how the program impacted their lives. Hollie Cook, a junior at Burke County High, is an open heart surgery survivor and stated, "Being part of this program has allowed me to do things I never dreamed of."

Cook hopes to attend college at either East Georgia State College or Georgia Military College.

"Being able to visit so many colleges has been incredible," she said.

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