



BPS Adult Education Division Administrators met with GED graduate. Left to right: Lisa Baines, Supervisor; Amanda Vellake, Director; Derek Zieziula, Graduate; Chantal Michaux, Career Advisor; Marielle Foster, Supervisor.

Caring educators credited with student's success

The Buffalo Public Schools Adult Education Division has been offering high school equivalency diploma (HSE) classes for decades. Thousands of students have graduated over the years and moved on to higher education, workforce training, and gainful employment because of this important credential.

One of them recently returned to share his story about perseverance, academic achievement, and a teacher and an advisor who made all the difference in the world. In August, Derek Zieziula met with the Division's Director Amanda Vellake and her leadership team to recount his educational experience and recognize the Division's instructional staff whom he credits for his success.

Derek described his HSE instructor, Jim Nowak, as a phenomenal teacher. "I realized early on that Jim really cared about my goals and my plans. I knew I could trust him because of that." Derek emphasized how his self-worth grew as his relationship developed with Jim, a master-level instructor and a key staff member in the Division's Distance Education department.



Left to right: Jim Nowak, HSE Instructor with Derek Zieziula.

Chantal Michaux, a long-time Career Advisor for the Division played a significant role as well in Derek's achievements. Instructors focus on academics. Career Advisors ensure that students have the resources they need to address the challenges that arise for adult students. For Derek, a lack of role models while he was growing up limited his knowledge of career opportunities and how to navigate and access them. Chantal has extensive experience in career exploration and employment options that benefitted Derek. She is also a K-12 certified school counselor and is currently working on her LMHC (licensed mental health counselor) master's degree.

[Studies](#) have shown that students are more motivated to learn and be engaged in the classroom when educators demonstrate that they care. In addition to learning what he needed to pass the GED® exam, Derek acquired life skills that have enabled him to succeed. After receiving his diploma, he went on to enroll at Bryant and Stratton and is currently working as a commercial realtor with Hunt Real Estate while also studying investment banking.

This is in sharp contrast to how he describes himself when he first enrolled in the HSE program. "I had very low confidence. I come from a very strong family but we still faced economic challenges." Derek's mother is a single parent who has worked two or three jobs for as long as Derek can remember.

"She always made sure that we had food to eat – even when she had none for herself. She sacrificed for me and my sister." Derek has memories of winters without heat in their home. "You could see our breath inside the house."

In his teens, Derek attended a traditional public high school where he excelled at sports. But a brain injury sidelined him and he dropped out of school in his senior year. He was treated with numerous drugs, including powerful anti-depressants that left him feeling like a zombie while not relieving the pain or depression. He finally found a doctor who put him on a healthy regimen that allowed him to work and to begin considering his options for the future.

Eventually, he decided to pursue his HSE.

"It wasn't an easy decision. I still had self-doubt." But he was eager to earn his diploma as quickly as possible. Jim and Chantal played a huge role in making that a reality.

Prospective students often ask how long it will take before they are ready to take the GED exam. While there is no formula for answering that question, students who initially test at higher academic levels typically take less than a year. Derek qualified for the Division's accelerated Distance Education Program which allowed him the flexibility to do most of his work at home while meeting with Jim and Chantal periodically. He completed the program and sat for the GED® exam in eight months – and passed.

Now he wants to share his story with other students who may be facing barriers to getting to the finish line and earning their diplomas. At Director Vellake's invitation, Derek was appointed as a Student Ambassador and will be meeting with those currently enrolled in HSE classes to share his encouragement and, hopefully, inspire them to work hard.

"I remember the past when I wanted to quit before I even started. I know how difficult it is when you don't believe in yourself. But I am evidence that failure is just another learning experience and does make you stronger." His message to new students who are struggling: "You are what you see yourself as. You have to see yourself as successful with every new step you take."

For more information about the BPS Adult Education Division, visit www.UpSkill.org.