



Classroom Spotlight

Solvay Middle School
Solvay Union Free School District

- Gina LaPlant, Special Education Teacher
- Francesca Branciforte, Speech Language Pathologist

Solvay Middle School's Bearcat Buzz Cafe: *It's not even about the coffee!*

There's an exciting new addition to the Solvay Middle School program this year: The Bearcat Buzz Cafe! This student-led initiative enables Life Skills learners to transition from the classroom to the "real world," allowing students to hold real job titles such as Barista, Cashier, and Server, while helping them practice valuable life skills to help them grow their independence.



This student-run coffee cart is facilitated by the Solvay Middle School Life Skills Program and was developed by special education teacher, Gina LaPlant, and speech-language pathologist, Francesca Branciforte.

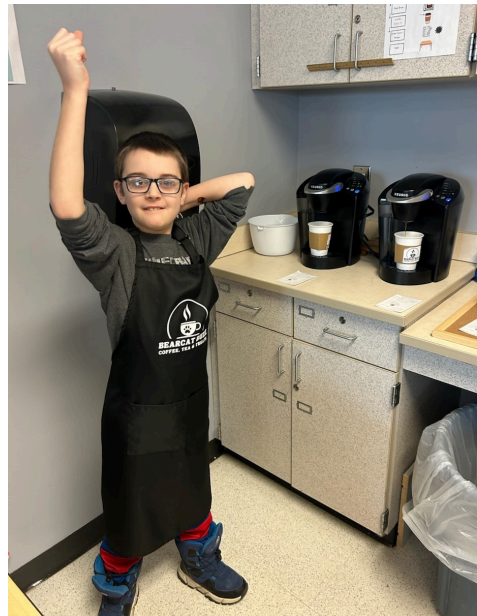


Bearcat Buzz Cafe has allowed students to practice financial literacy while managing cash, making change, and taking inventory. Interacting with unfamiliar adults can be challenging for many students. However, participating in the coffee cart has been a huge confidence builder, allowing them to put life skills into practice with real-life interactions. Each order calls for an array of skill sets: eye contact, professional greetings, active listening, good hygiene practices, as well as money management.

The Cafe ensures that all learners are supported and have a voice. Several students utilize communication devices on tablets with the TouchChat application. When delivering orders, they navigate to the appropriate greetings and responses as needed.

The Bearcat Buzz Cafe was originally planned to run once per month, with Life Skills staff doing the baking. However, after the initial kick-off, it was evident that both students and staff were eager to have the Cafe open more frequently, and other school staff members quickly volunteered to donate baked goods.

Staff members submit their orders online in advance. They can choose from several hot drink options, flavored syrups, and fresh-baked treats. There has been a steady showcase of delights on the menu: coffee cake, muffins, cookies, cupcakes, scones, bars, biscuits, and more!



The feedback from the school community has been overwhelmingly positive. Adults who don't typically interact with the Life Skills students have expressed their joy in having them visit their classrooms with treats.



The Cafe has allowed the Life Skills Program to participate in several community outings, where students were able to place and pay for food orders independently using their voice or Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices, practice social skills, and engage in choice activities for enjoyment--such as seeing a movie or visiting the zoo.

The Bearcat Buzz Cafe is not only about providing coffee and treats for staff, but it is also giving students a platform for growth in a safe, "real-world environment," allowing them to practice skills for a more independent future.

If you would like more information about starting your own Life Skills Cafe, please contact Gina LaPlant at glaplant@solvayschools.org.

Source: <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/NYSED-OSE-Spring-2026-Newsletter.html?soid=1110847617454&aid=4YrKEj27yW8>

