

## Alachua County Public School students earn record number of industry certifications

Students attending Alachua County Public Schools (ACPS) earned 5,900 industry certifications during and immediately after the 2023-24 school year, the highest number in the district's history. That's a 34% increase over the 2022-23 totals.

ACPS middle and high school students earn certification by taking an industry exam confirming they have mastered skills and knowledge in a certain career field. Earning industry certifications can also mean scholarships and college credits.

"Industry certification is proof these students are well-prepared for work and post-secondary education in their chosen fields," said Shannon Ritter, the director of Career Technical Education (CTE) for Alachua County Public Schools. "It definitely gives them a significant advantage over other students as they apply for college, jobs or both."



Local students earned certifications in a wide range of fields, ranging from technology to culinary arts to healthcare. Eighty different industry certifications are offered through ACPS schools this year, with more being added each year.

This year, for example, students will have the opportunity to earn certification in the lucrative HVAC (heating, ventilation, air conditioning) field through a new course offered at Santa Fe High School.

"We work with committees made up of professionals in each of the career fields offered in our schools," said Ritter. "Their expertise helps us keep up with industry trends so that our programs stay relevant and rigorous."

More than 6500 middle and high school students are currently attending one of the district's sixteen Career Academies or taking a CTE course or courses. Through the Career and Professional Education (CAPE) legislation, bonus funding is awarded for each certification earned, resulting in \$2.6 million in funding. Of the bonus funding awarded, 80% goes back to the program that earned the certifications, allowing them to purchase new equipment, software, and other items to enhance the program.

ACPS graduates who earned certifications through a district CTE program have gone on to achieve significant success in their careers. One example is Chef Noam Bilitzer, owner of the Meesh Meesh Mediterranean restaurant in Louisville, KY, which was recently ranked the 2<sup>nd</sup> best new restaurant in the South by Yelp. In 2011, he graduated from the Institute of Culinary Arts at Eastside High School with certifications from the National Restaurant Association and the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association. He also graduated early from the prestigious Johnson and Wales University Culinary Arts program.

"ICA was an incredible program, one of the best in the state, one of the best in the nation," said Bilitzer. "I flew through culinary school with people who had been cooking for a decade and my professors were often telling me that they had to grade me on a different scale, it was not a fair comparison to the other students."

Career tech courses and academies are among those funded through the One Mill for Schools voter initiative, which is up for renewal on the general election ballot this fall.

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