

CHEROKEE HIGH SCHOOL

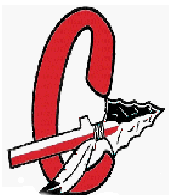
Georgia High School Students Appreciate Short- and Long-term Benefits of Microsoft Office Specialist Certification

Cherokee High School's investment in certification offers students knowledge, skills, and certificates that prove computing proficiency

Setting up Cherokee High School's Microsoft® Office Specialist testing facility wasn't easy. A closet was converted into a testing lab, computer upgrades were purchased, and funds to pay for student exams were negotiated. Finally, after a great deal of work and preparation, the first Office Specialist exams were administered to Cherokee High School students and teachers in Canton, Georgia. Almost immediately, students began to realize the certificates they were earning would benefit them now—while in high school—and in the future as they make plans for employment and additional education.

BACKGROUND

A few years ago, Susan Dreschel and Mary Catherine Ricks, both Career Technology Instructors at Cherokee High School in Canton, Georgia, north of Atlanta, received a promotional flyer from **DDC**



Training Services, a Certiport Authorized Academic Distributor. The flyer invited them to attend an Office Specialist certification course at a local technology training company. Upon conclusion of the workshop, both educators took Office Specialist certification exams. Dreschel earned Office Specialist Word and Excel certifications; Ricks earned Office Specialist Word and PowerPoint® certifications. "We knew that if we were going to teach these programs in our classes, we should have the certifications," Dreschel said.

Two years later, at a meeting for educators in Atlanta, another publishing company offered a workshop on the Microsoft certifications. Dreschel and Ricks attended the seminar, researched certification options further, and decided to offer Office Specialist certification to Cherokee High School students. "We see certification in so much of our literature," Dreschel explained. "Our textbooks are all based on Microsoft certification. It's become a standard everyone measures by. As awareness of certification increases, it becomes an even better validation of a student's skill level. It is accepted as a standard in business and in the business-education community."

PROCESS

First, Dreschel and Ricks established Cherokee High School as a Certiport Center. "We had to set up the physical space and upgrade hardware," Dreschel said. "It was a major expenditure, and there were some roadblocks. But we had great support from the principal and the county office." The teachers created a testing center in a large closet and worked with school system administrators to determine who would pay for student exams. "Finally the Director of Assessment at the county office agreed to pay. It was a huge help!"

In fact, the school system generously agreed to pay all of the costs associated with offering certification at Cherokee High School. **DDC Training Services Microsoft Office Specialist Prep Test**

packages were purchased for all of the computers in the school's computer lab. "Students are required to work through this software," Dreschel said. "We consider it a final benchmark to measure against before students are offered the opportunity to take an Office Specialist exam."

Several of Cherokee High School's Career Technology Department courses include training for Office Specialist exams. "For example, students who do well in our *Business Document Processing* course and work through *Prep Test* may take the Microsoft Word exam," Dreschel explained. Office Specialist exams are an optional component of the courses, although some Cherokee High School teachers offer extra credit to students who pass them. "There is no pressure, and the exams are not automatically available to everyone. Students have to have good grades in the right classes and must prove their proficiency on the practice tests. At a teacher's discretion, assuming the student scores above our cut-off score on the *Prep Test*, he or she may test."

Stephanie Graves, a 12th-grade student at Cherokee High School, certified in Microsoft Word and Excel while in the *Business Data Applications* course. She earned extra credit toward her final grade when she earned her Office Specialist credentials. "The course really helped me prepare for the exams," she said. "I also went through the programs carefully. It is a timed test, so I wanted to make sure I knew the menus and other functions so I could perform quickly while I was testing." Graves found the *Prep Tests* to be helpful. "I went through them, got my scores, and was able to get used to the testing experience because the question style was similar to the Office Specialist exams."



Stephanie Graves

Dreschel said students are very enthusiastic about preparing for and taking Office Specialist certification exams. "We work in class to help students prepare," she said. "We offer individual help. I even have students who come in on their lunch hour to prepare. If students meet our standards, we are happy to pay for their exams. They realize that if they wait until they've graduated from high school, they'll have to pay for certification themselves."

Carter Bricker, a recent graduate of the high school, certified in Microsoft Word after taking *Business Document Processing* and *Computer Applications* classes. "The exam was thorough," he said. "I was tested on features I don't use often like comments and document tracking. You really have to know how to do a task within the program. I liked being able to actually use Word to figure out the problem posed in the exam. That's so much better than multiple-choice exams, because things are different in theory than in practice."

Graves also approved of the format of Office Specialist exams. "I liked it a lot," she said. "It was clear, easy to use, and had directions that were easy to understand."

CERTIFICATION

Cherokee High School began testing students to earn Office Specialist certifications only a few months ago. "We field tested the process ourselves first. Then we provided students the opportunity to take exams," Dreschel said. "Now 78 students have Office Specialist certifications in Microsoft Word, 12 have earned them in Excel, four have PowerPoint certifications, and one student is certified in Microsoft Access. Because of students' thorough preparation, the school enjoys an extremely high pass-rate."



Cherokee High School students proudly display their Microsoft Office Specialist certificates.

"Only seven students have failed exams, and they plan to retake the exams and pass," Dreschel added.

Dreschel and Ricks have also prepared for and earned Office Specialist certifications. "If you administer it, you better have it," Dreschel said. She added that, generally, Cherokee High's more advanced students are the ones who are most enthusiastic about the certifications. "It does tend to be our better students who understand the importance of this certification," she said.

Among the students pursuing certification is an exchange student from Denmark. "He is so excited about certification," Dreschel said. "He is working toward Excel certification in one of his classes and is working outside of class to earn his Word credential. He understands this is a worldwide certification. He can take it home to Denmark, and it will be beneficial for him there."

RESULT

"Certification is something attractive for students, whether they are planning on entering the workforce after high school graduation or going on to college," Dreschel said. "A lot of students will look for a part-time job during college. Any way you look at it, this certificate proves your skills. It is a widely accepted standard. We tell our students certification is a standard in the business world. It will help them get a job or a better job with a better rate of pay. Certification shows what you know."

Bricker is now studying Information Systems at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro. "I might have to use these skills in the business field I will be studying in college," he said. "It looks good to have a certification like this, and the experience will probably help me as I work toward other computing certifications."

Graves took the extra step to earn certifications because she wants to someday pursue a teaching career. "I see teachers all around me at school who use computers all day," she said. "More and more, technology is in our schools. I enjoy computers; certification will benefit me later in my life."

Graves has already had the opportunity to benefit from the skills she developed while preparing for her Office Specialist exams. She enhances the presentation of papers and other assignments in her classes and has even helped her mother in her profession. "On the Word exam, there was a question about mail merges," she explained. "The same day I took my test, I went home, and my mom needed help doing a mail merge for her new job. I knew exactly how to do it! I can do so much more with Word than just typing papers in Times 12-point font. My knowledge goes beyond the 'normal stuff.' I know the deeper parts of the programs—including things that require a little thought. You have to know the programs well to pass the exams."

Graves anticipates her Microsoft Excel skills will make her summer job easier, too. "Last year I worked at a summer camp and was asked to inventory some equipment using Excel. It was so hard," she revealed. "I was excited to go back to work this summer. Now I can do the tasks so much easier. I even know shortcuts!"

Certification will also help Graves find a meaningful job while she's in college. "My certifications will give me more options," she said. "Hopefully I'll be able to get a job in a law office or as a secretary, rather than having to work as a waitress or cashier somewhere."

Cherokee High School students are only beginning to realize the long-term benefits of Office Specialist certification. As they do, their confidence develops and their future prospects expand. "My certifications mean I've accomplished something," Graves said. "They are part of my high school career that will extend beyond high school and into my life. My soccer trophies are great right now, but my Microsoft certifications are great now and will be a great benefit to me later."