

Brewing Opportunity:

How Mr. Hendee's Senator's Café is Preparing Students for the Real World

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At Carson High School in Carson City, the passing bell doesn't just signal a new class—it triggers a rush of activity. The hiss of steaming milk, the clatter of dishes, and the smell of fresh coffee fills the air as students move with purpose.

Graduates have gone on to find jobs in local restaurants and cafés, already prepared with experience in customer service, teamwork, and professional standards.

At the center of the café is Lance Hendee, a teacher who left a successful career in retail and restaurant kitchens to help students with disabilities prepare for life after high school.

Before teaching, Hendee opened new Dollar Tree locations, managed Target stores, and worked in restaurants—experience he now uses to teach students

Left: Sam Brady and Gigi working together.



Above: Ayden Zimmerman greets a customer with a smile.

how real businesses function. "My class is run exactly like a business," Hendee says, "with entry-level workers, supervisors, and managers. Everyone earns their role through responsibility and skill."

The Senator's Café operates as a functioning business, not a simulation. Students clock in, follow professional hygiene and food-safety standards, and handle real responsibilities. The café even undergoes regular health inspections. Success is measured in practical terms: dishwashers reaching 180°F, orders prepared correctly, and cash drawers balanced.

Students represent a wide range of abilities. Some have developmental disabilities such as Down syndrome; others use wheelchairs or have limited speech. Hendee focuses on what students can achieve, breaking tasks into steps and providing scaffolded instruction. Some students receive hands-on guidance, while others learn by collaborating with peers.

Every student has a role: preparing food, operating equipment, greeting customers, delivering orders, or managing transactions. Customer service skills are emphasized daily. Students with limited speech practice phrases repeatedly: "Good morning, how are



you?" "So you ordered a coffee and a sandwich?" These interactions build confidence and essential communication skills for the workforce.

Financial literacy is another key lesson. Students manage a small cash "bank," process payments, and reconcile drawers. Mistakes have consequences, teaching accountability and the link between effort and results.

The hierarchy encourages growth. Entry-level workers can earn promotions to student supervisors, learning to lead peers and manage workflow. Ashley, one of the supervisors, said, "I'm really proud of myself because I worked hard to earn the position of supervisor. Now I know how to work and how to help other people as a supervisor."

The café's impact extends beyond high school. Graduates have gone

on to find jobs in local restaurants and cafés, already prepared with experience in customer service, teamwork, and professional standards. Employers recognize their readiness and confidence.

For Hendee, Senator's Café is about more than daily operations—it's about independence, skill, and self-worth. Students learn responsibility, problem-solving, and social skills in a real-world context, gaining experience that lectures or textbooks cannot provide.

What began as a small school coffee shop has become a bridge to the community, a place where students with diverse abilities gain confidence, practical skills, and a sense of purpose. Every sandwich assembled, every greeting delivered, and every cup of coffee served represents a step toward independence.



Above: Mr. Hendee's students.

At the Senator's Café, students aren't just learning how to make coffee—they're learning how to build life skills.