



## **St. Johns Tech probably isn't what you think it is. But it is successful**

By Travis Gibson  
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Cynthia Williams has been fighting stereotypes since she became principal at St. Johns Technical High School about five years ago.

"We hate the term 'vo-tech'" Williams said. "I think sometimes when people classify us as a Vo-tech, they are aligning us with only providing those services in the technical field. We provide all services that any other school would provide with our students."

However it is defined, it is working and Williams is trying to get the word out, helping to educate the public about exactly what St. Johns Technical High School does.

For starters, graduation rates have increased by more than 50 percent in the last four years for the school of about 300 students in grades 6 through 12.

Many who attend arrive at the school because they have trouble with academic achievement in middle school or have specific or at-risk needs, Williams said. Some are at least a grade behind and about 80 percent of students are on free or reduced lunch. Williams said the school doesn't accept every student, as some think, but rather students are recruited based on their learning needs.

"We have a waiting list," Williams said.

Students who were accepted told *The Record* that after they arrived, they have benefited from smaller classroom settings and increased one-on-one time.

"It's a really personal experience," said Savannah, a 10th-grade student. "I was failing in middle school. In my first year, I'm actually getting A's and B's now."

For the 2012-13 school year, the graduation rate at the school was around 29 percent. For the 2016-17 school year, it was 88.9 percent, close to the countywide graduation rate of 90.9 percent the same year. The school has nearly doubled in size over the same period.

But Williams said graduation isn't the only goal.

“When they leave here, we don’t want them just to have a high school diploma. We want our students to go into programs, so in many instances students can get out of poverty and have health benefits,” Williams said.

The school offers the Academy of Coastal & Water Resources and is the only high school in the county with an Academy of Culinary Arts. The school has a relationship with Carlisle Interconnect Technologies, a local designer and manufacturer of high-performance wire and cable, that allows 15 to 20 students to intern two to three hours a day and eventually earn money through the IT Manufacturing Program. Last year, six seniors were hired by the company, Williams said.

“It might not seem like the most glorified job, but for a kid to be able to come out and make a viable salary with health benefits, that’s awesome,” Williams said.

Students can also enroll in vocational programs like landscaping, daycare or web design offered at First Coast Technical College, located next to the school, but only if their schedule permits. It’s the same opportunity offered to nearby St. Augustine High students and other students in the county.

“We are getting kids who are at large schools who want to be a cosmetologist,” Williams said. “If they are a student here, they can walk over to the college and take cosmetology.”

For students who want to go the military or college route, the school helps with that, as well. Students regularly take trips to Florida colleges and recent graduates have gone to University of West Florida, UNF and Bethune-Cookman.

Williams credits the teachers, guidance counselors and the students’ hard work for the recent success of the school. Assistant Principal Holli Winter credits Williams.

“What she does best is showcase our students,” Winter said. “I have never anyone else in the district that seeks out opportunity to put our students in the limelight. She is the most valuable person in this school because of the connections she’s made.”