Stop by a Park District facility between 9:30 and 11am on a school day, and you just might see high school students from East or North High School working hand and hand with Park District staff to prepare for programs, care for animals and maintain facilities. As part of Community Unit School District 303’s Community-Based Vocational Training Program, better known as On-The-Job Training or OJT, several amazing students and their CUSD303-provided job coaches volunteer their time to help Park District staff with various projects. Since 2014, the OJT students and coaches have worked 1,666 hours at Park District facilities including the Hickory Knolls Discovery Center, Pottawatomie Community Center and Primrose Farm.

Over the last 18 months, eight OJT students and three job coaches have worked at Primrose Farm to assist with midmorning chores – putting animals out to pasture, cleaning barns, making feed, washing milking dishes, and putting down afternoon rations. They come Monday to Friday, rain, snow or shine, to help with these essential jobs. For the students, Primrose offers a chance to learn new skills and to focus on transitioning from project-to-project. Many have never worked with animals before starting at the farm and after a few weeks they’re greeting cows by name, leading 2,500 lb. draft horses out of stalls, mastering grain recipes, and wielding shovels with strength and skill. “I love seeing the kids experiencing new things,” commented Laura Johns, Manager of Farm Programs and Interpretive Services. “They work hard and have an infectious joy. We are so blessed to have them volunteering with us at Primrose!”

“OJT has been a godsend to Hickory Knolls,” said Pam Otto, Manager of Nature Programs and Interpretive Services. “We have increased their number of days to three this year, and their help has been invaluable with tasks that span a wide range of areas: room setups and takedowns; window and display cleaning; animal care; laundry folding; and program preparation. We are so thankful for everyone’s cheery attitudes too! We look forward to a long and happy future with OJT, forging relationships that are helpful for all.”