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Challenge Program's mission is to motivate students

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For the past six years, The Challenge Program has partnered with local businesses to instill motivation in high school students that will last long after they receive their diplomas.

"It's a very rewarding experience for the businesses and it becomes a resource for the schools," said Renee Shaw, director of program development. "Sometimes this is the first relationship built with a business and student."

The program seeks to motivate and better students by providing financial incentives for success in four key areas: academic improvement, attendance, community service and best overall academic excellence. Awards are given to students in grades 10 through 12.

"This is more like a year-long process and involves rewarding students, schools and businesses," Shaw said.

Local businesses support nearly 125 schools in Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia and Delaware.

"I think that the types of qualities The Challenge Program hopes to instill in young people are what we need in employees," said Hank Parke, spokesman for PBS Coals. The business has supported Shade-Central City High School students for about four years.

"We want people who will do their best and have good attendance, and that carries over into their work life," he said.

At the beginning of every school year Parke talks to students about PBS Coals and how employment is possible.

Amy Bradley, director of marketing for Conemaugh Health System, said The Challenge Program helps students learn about potential careers.

"Ultimately these are the kids that are going to be working in our hospitals some day and it's good to encourage them and support them," she said. "One of the things people don't realize is that with some medical careers, a student can come right out of high school and get into a program."

Conemaugh Health System also hosts of a panel of professional in the health care industry to answer questions from guidance counselors and principals in participating school districts.

"I think the approach of working with guidance counselors and principals helps educate them so they can educate the students," Bradley said.

There are 10 school districts in Somerset County as well as the Somerset County Technology Center that are part of The Challenge Program. The North Star school district is the only district in the county without a business sponsor.

“We participated in the past but this year we were not able to find anybody to sponsor the district,” said Superintendent Shawn Kovac.

Shaw said that the organization tries to include as many school districts in the program as possible, but a school cannot be part of the program without secured funding from a business or individual.

Generally the retention rate of a business supporting a school is high — 88 to 90 percent, according to Shaw.

“It’s one of the few donations a business can make that gets 100 percent return in a positive direction,” she said.

Barbara Grandinetti, executive director of the program, said the organization is fortunate businesses see the value in helping high school students.

“It’s important people support what we’re doing because we all pay when students don’t finish high school — with social services and incarceration costs — that costs all taxpayers money,” she said. “In addition to motivating students we want to make sure they’re aware of business opportunities in their own back yard. We don’t want them to become a beacon of light in another community.”

The Challenge Program has awarded more than \$1 million to students since its inception, according to its website. The program has a waiting list of schools. For more information about the program, visit www.tcpinc.org.

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