

Challenge Program at Pittsburgh Milliones gives students incentive to succeed

By Megan Harris
Sunday, Nov. 16, 2014, 9:50 p.m.



Any opportunity that bridges the gap between earnest, hardworking kids and employment has a place at Pittsburgh Milliones 6-12, principal Derrick Hardy said.

“For many of our students, college is the only outlet to change their current living and learning conditions,” he said. “The Challenge pushes them to prioritize their study habits. That’s exciting to see.”

Students at the Hill District school were recognized recently at a kick-off assembly for The Challenge Program Inc., an incentive program between local businesses and high schools that awards scholarships to students for their successes in attendance; studying science, technology, engineering and math; performing community service; improving their academic performance; and attaining academic excellence.

Underclassmen in 10th and 11th grades practiced mock job interviews with Huntington Bank and learned how to compete for bonuses and recognition through the school year. Leading candidates score real-world scholarships their senior year, Hardy said.

“The partnerships have really evolved,” said Anna Gibbs, Challenge Program communications manager. “Businesses come in, introduce themselves and connect the kids with what they’re about so students get a real taste of what employment options already exist in their communities.”

Now in 122 schools in five states — including 46 in Western Pennsylvania alone — The Challenge Program links industry leaders in medicine, chemistry, industry, business, law, architecture, construction, finance and retail with local schools with students who could benefit from that extra financial incentive, Gibbs said. Many companies offer tours. Banks might send a representative to discuss financial literacy. A hospital might teach first aid.

“That see-hear-feel-touch response gets you motivated,” Gibbs said.

Milliones students recognized for their achievement thus far are Dre'Shana Shaffner, Shaquawn Crook, Tier McCullough, Alexis Coffey, Davis Wise, Amon Brown, DaQuon Tibney, Dajour Washington, JaiSauna Calloway-Houser and Jordan Jenkins.

Last week, executive director and co-founder Barbara Grandinetti got “the best thing I’ve seen since this started 11 years ago,” she said.

A former program participant from the class of 2007 sent her a check with a letter.

“You helped me,” he wrote. “Now it’s my time to help you.”

Grandinetti said, “We want to make what they’re learning relevant, and we hope they pay it forward, not just to us, but to anyone they can help.”