

## BUSINESS PROFILE



Challenge Program student leaders with the program's executive director, Barbara Grandinetti.

# Challenge Program

By Katrina Perkosky  
Photo by Jacob Koestler

Pennsylvania is the second oldest state in the nation, but not because it was founded in 1787. Instead, Pennsylvania has an old population due to the current trend of young adults leaving the state for higher education and employment opportunities. Pennsylvania has become a place for retirees.

But one local initiative is attempting to reverse this exodus by providing monetary incentives for local high schoolers and educating them about the opportunities that exist in the area. With a mission to eliminate the "brain drain," the Challenge Program is enlightening and

informing students while promoting western Pennsylvania.

"My interest and first love is in Johnstown," says Daniel T. Perkins, founder of the Challenge Program. In 2003, Perkins, a Johnstown native and owner, president and CEO of MTS Technologies, Inc., envisioned a way to encourage students to perform better in school. He built lasting ties between students and local businesses, introducing them to the workplace opportunities that exist in the region by attending the annual Showcase for Commerce.

Perkins believed in the program so much he used his own money to reward

the first students involved in the program, students from Bishop McCort High School. "This is my opportunity to give back to the kids," he says. "The kids are our first line of defense."

Now the program reaches nearly 32,000 students in 33 school districts and will award almost \$100,000 this year. Additionally, there are plans in the works to add 39 more schools for the 2006-2007 school year. "It's been monumentally successful," says Perkins.

The money for the incentives comes from area businesses, defense contractors and local elected officials, most notably U.S. Representative John Murtha.

Students in 10th to 12th grades compete within their own school to earn \$250 in four areas: most improved in their grade, best attendance in their grade, most community service in their grade and best overall senior grade point average. The checks have no strings attached; the students can spend the money however they please.

But motivating students to achieve in their academic studies and community involvement is only half of what the Challenge Program does. "The other important piece we do is introducing students to businesses and introducing businesses to their future employees," says Barbara Grandinetti, executive director of the program. This is done by inviting students to attend the Showcase for Commerce in June, a yearly trade show that brings together around 140 regional businesses and organizations at the Cambria County War Memorial Arena.

"This is our pinnacle event," says Grandinetti. "We bring over 160 students together with area businesses and international companies, and the point is to introduce [the students] to business."

While at the Showcase, students learn about the nearby opportunities that exist in varied fields of study, ranging from healthcare to technology to manufacturing.

Students are asked to complete a survey that measures their attitudes about the area's job market before they attend the Showcase, and then after. Their responses are overwhelmingly changed after realizing that there are jobs available in Johnstown and western Pennsylvania in their chosen fields of study.

"It was an eye-opening experience to see the kinds of jobs that were available," says Ali Terchanik, a junior at Bishop McCort High School who attended the Showcase last year. "It showed you don't have to go too far out of the area to find a job." JM