

# Program moves into Fayette schools to build bridge between business and students

By: James Pletcher Jr. , Herald-Standard



Mary Dreliszak, manager of program development for the Challenge Program, explains some of the features that can help bring together local business and senior high students. The program awards \$250 prizes to students who excel in academics, community services and other areas. Ed Cope/Herald-Standard

All are allowable expenses under the Challenge Program, a three-year-old non-profit Johnstown-based effort to build bridges between high school students and business.

The Challenge Program, which awards \$250 prizes to students in four areas, is entering Fayette County schools this year for the first time, Mary Dreliszak, manager of program development, said.

It has the support of Pennsylvania's Acting Secretary of Education Gerald L. Zahorchak, who calls it a "proven success in motivating students to perform well in school by providing incentives for academic achievement and community service.

"In the process, the program builds a bridge between local high school students and the business community that helps reverse the 'brain drain' in

Pennsylvania," Zahorchak said.

Dreliszak said a U.S. Department of Education study of the program showed it helped boost overall student performance and community service in the schools it served.

She explained how the Challenge Program founder, Dan Perkins, worked his way from poor beginnings in Johnstown to head his own company, MTS Technologies

Inc.

"He became a shoe shine boy to help earn money to support his family," Dreliszak said. However, Perkins noticed a car wash across the street where he felt he could find more customers. Asking the car wash owner if he could set up his stand, he was told only if he didn't spend more than a minute on each shoe shine.

"Dan hired a friend to help him. He did one shoe and his friend did the other and they got it done in a minute," Dreliszak said.

At age 16, the car wash owner was so impressed with Perkins, he made him manager of the facility. And, he asked him what he was going to do after military service and college.

"Dan didn't really think he had that in his plans but he changed his mind and went."

Dreliszak then adds the punch line to the story: "And the owner of that car wash was John Murtha," a veteran U.S. congressman who represents the 12th District, which includes Fayette County and Johnstown.

Perkins wanted to give back to the community and created the Challenge Program as a way to accomplish that aim. He started by spending \$2,500 of his own money at Bishop McCourt High School in Johnstown.

The program had grown to include 15 schools by its second year where 50 awards totaling \$37,500 were made. That grew to nearly \$100,000 by the next year and included 33 schools with student enrollments of about 32,000 students.

"This year we are moving the program out to Fayette, Greene, Allegheny and part of Washington County," she said.

The program, Dreliszak added, offers motivation and opportunity to students in 10th, 11th and 12th grades and the chance to win a \$250 prize to those who excel in most improved academically, best attendance, community service and best overall grade point average. The program partners with local business to educate students on entrepreneurship while also motivating them to excel in their classroom and community.

Dreliszak said representatives of the businesses attend school assemblies where they talk about themselves and available jobs.

Since 2003 through the support of business, foundations and individuals, the Challenge Program has been introduced to more than 46,250 high school students. Checks totaling \$139,000 have been presented to 556 high school students.

Dreliszak said the program matches local businesses that sponsor high schools. Schools and their business partners so far include Geibel Catholic High School and Trident Systems Inc.; Brownsville Senior High School and Lou Brown; Connellsville Senior High School and Armstrong Cable; Carmichaels High School in Greene County and BAE Systems; Laurel Highlands High School and Advanced Acoustic Concepts, and Fayette County Area Career & Technology Center and Shumar Welding

Schools remaining to be matched, she added, are Waynesburg Central High

School, Jefferson Morgan Senior High School, Mapletown Senior High School, Albert Gallatin High School and Frazier High School in Perryopolis.

It's estimated that for the school year 2006-2007, the program will be in 72 schools, have 70,000 participants, 70 business ambassadors and present \$216,000 in awards to students.

Barbara Grandinetti, Challenge Program executive director, said it is surprising how some students used their money. "There was one who had a dual credit enrollment at a community college and used his money to pay for the credit because he couldn't afford it.

"Another girl bought a softball bat. That sounded odd until we learned it was a special bat that helped her improve her game and helped her get a softball scholarship to St. Francis University," Grandinetti said.

"Then, I was at one school and one of the students who won jumped up, cheered and clapped his hands. I didn't know what to think until the guidance counselor said that he came from a very poor family and that some of the money would be used for food."

For additional information on the Challenge Program, call Dreliszak at 724-628-2435 or Grandinetti at 814-533-7403.