

Progeny owner takes on hiring challenges with 'Challenge Program'

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Progeny Systems owner Walt Kitonis hopes to add as many as 30 positions to his 60-person work force in Alta Vista business park by the end of the year as part of his mission to bring more jobs to the area.

As the founder of a company that provides high-tech solutions for submarines, aircraft and other defense-related projects, Kitonis also is concerned about the level of educational preparation for the types of jobs his company offers.

"There truly is an educational crisis in our country," he said. While Kitonis said he has been working with California University of Pennsylvania on curriculum, he said he wants to do the same with other colleges.

He said nearly 90 percent of Progeny's employees have two-year technical degrees.

Kitonis also is a supporter of The Challenge Program Inc. that is operating in some Pennsylvania and Delaware high schools. Founded in 2003 by Johnstown native Daniel Perkins, the program, which reaches more than 32,000 students in 33 school districts including several locally, is designed to act as a bridge between schools and businesses.

High school sophomores, juniors and seniors are encouraged to perform well and are rewarded in four categories: most improved, best attendance, most community service and best overall grade-point average. Each winning student receives a \$250 award for his or her efforts.

Mary Drelisak, manager of program development for the Challenge Program said local high schools currently participating in the program in Washington County are Bentworth,

Burgettstown, California and Charleroi. Participating schools in Greene County are Carmichaels, Greene County Career and Technology Center, Jefferson-Morgan, Mapletown and Waynesburg Central High School. West Greene High School has signed on to participate in the 2007-2008 school year. Money for the incentives — a total of \$3,000 for each participating school — comes from area businesses, defense contractors and local elected officials. The program has received strong support from U.S. Rep. John Murtha, D-Johnstown.

Kitonis said he doesn't have a problem with a program that gives cash incentives to students who work to increase their performance. He said he considers the \$250 awards to be nominal, adding that the most important aspect of the program is that it gives students an opportunity to meet with business owners, take tours of companies and learn more about how they operate.

According to Kitonis, his support is another way to get young people to see that there are local opportunities for them.

"From my perspective, I have to find different ways to give back, and this creates some sort of energy among kids," he said.

He's also hopeful that at least some students will pursue the technical education that could open doors for them at a company like Progeny, where, he said, finding additional contracts isn't as challenging as finding qualified workers.

"I can get way more work, but I need good people," he said.

■ For more information on the Challenge Program, contact Mary Drelisak, senior manager of program development, at 724-984-0860 or e-mail at challenge@zoominternet.net. The program Web site address is www.thechallengeprogram.org.