

Program offers cash awards to motivate high school students

By Angie Oravec , Herald-Standard

Motivating students to succeed in school with cash awards is the objective of The Challenge Program, now entering its second year in local high schools.

Mary Dreliszak, senior manager of program development for Fayette, Greene and Washington counties, presented the program to Uniontown Area High School's freshman, sophomore, junior and senior classes earlier this week.

"You have to go out and raise the bar for yourself and push yourself beyond your comfort level," Dreliszak told students. "You can make anything happen, and The Challenge Program is the voice that can make it happen."

Two Uniontown businesses, BAE Systems and Trident Systems, have provided \$3,000 in cash awards to be presented to 10th-, 11th- and 12th-grade students at the end of the school year. Since 2003, \$350,000 has been presented to high school students, according to a press release on the program.

A student can be recognized in one or more categories, depending on their performance and their hours of community service over the course of the academic year. The categories are: most improved academically, best attendance, community service and best overall grade-point average.

High school guidance counselors choose the students, who will receive \$250 checks for their efforts.

Ed Nichols, program manager at Trident Systems located in downtown Uniontown's National City Bank building, said it's natural that if a student works and studies hard, he or she gets better grades.

"You have to take the time now to get the skill set you need because (Trident Systems) gives preference to people from this area," Nichols told students. "We want you to think about this now."

Nichols said two Uniontown Area High School graduates are employed at the Uniontown facility - Terry Moore of the class of 1994 as a senior software engineer and Bob Marcinek of the class of 2001 as a radio frequency engineering technician, a sign that students can do it, too.

Trident Systems manufactures electronics, including handheld devices military, police and fire fighters use to communicate with one another.

Robert Pena, human resources manager at BAE Systems, said the majority of the business' workforce is shop technicians and sandblasters who have a high school diploma and two years of education at a career or technical school plus two years experience in their area of work.

"Good grades are an indicator of how successful you will be in the workplace," said Pena, noting good references from teachers also help. "We will call teachers to see if you're a good student."

Pena also said good attendance is critical in the workforce, noting employees must follow the rules, including safety, and work well with their teammates.

"If you leave your co-worker shorthanded, they're going to have to carry your weight," he said.

Pena encouraged students to show initiative no matter where they work or are taught by continuing to find ways to improve these places.

"Be a true leader and now's the time to start working on that," he said.

BAE Systems, located across Route 119 from Penn State Fayette, The Eberly Campus, rebuilds Bradley Fighting Vehicles from Iraq and Afghanistan, equips them with technology and sends them back to the soldiers, said Pena.

Eleven Uniontown Area High School students were given cash awards last year, with no community service winner in the sophomore class,

noted Dreliszak.

"If you try to win an award, but don't get one, you do come a step closer to college or to a career," said Dreliszak. "You get a step closer to achieving your life goal."

She said last year's program will serve as a motivator for students to succeed this year.

"These students can see last year's students and know they persisted. It gives them something to shoot for," said Dreliszak.

Dreliszak said The Challenge Program not only works to motivate and award the youth of the region, but to also keep them living and working locally.

"Students realize the opportunities for jobs are in their backyard. They don't have to leave the area. We want them to stay here," Dreliszak said.

The Challenge Program is growing, she added. It will partner businesses with 72 schools this year, and because of the increased participation, will offer a higher cash award total to students.

The program operates in 13 Pennsylvania counties and five high schools in the state of Delaware. The program has grown from its humble beginnings in one school to this year operating in 150 schools and a projected distribution of \$450,000 in awards.

The program began in Fayette, Greene and Washington counties beginning with the 2006-07 school year. Barbara A. Grandinetti, executive director of the Johnstown-based program, said it is making an effort to reach the Pittsburgh region and has incorporated one Allegheny County high school this year.

All Fayette and Greene county high schools are participating and have been paired with one or two business sponsors.

The list is as follows: Albert Gallatin Area with Planning Systems and TeleTech, both of Uniontown; Brownsville Area with Lou Brown, a Virginia entrepreneur who started various technology companies; Connellsville Area with BAE Systems and Armstrong, a cable and Internet provider; Connellsville Career and Technology Center with Nemaquin Woodlands Resort and Spa; Fayette County Area Vocational-Technical School with Shumar's Welding and Machine Services near Brownsville and Argon ST in Uniontown; Frazier High School with Blaney Farms and Image Time Inc., both in Perryopolis; Laurel Highlands High School with Advanced Acoustic Concepts in Uniontown; and Geibel Catholic Middle-High School with Trident Systems.

Greene County high schools and their businesses are: the Greene County Career & Technology Center with Foundation Coal and Jefferson-Morgan High School with KDH Defense Systems, a defense contractor from Johnstown.

Carmichaels Area, Mapletown and Waynesburg Central high schools still need matched with a business sponsor.

California Area High School, along with other Washington County high schools, also is participating in the program. California Area has been paired with Redstone Pharmacy in California and Progeny Systems of Charleroi.

The nonprofit program has a goal to operate nationwide, as previously stated by its founder Daniel T. Perkins. Right now, program directors are concentrating on expanding in Pennsylvania to reach out to more students.