

Challenge Program making a difference

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Leaders of The Challenge Program have plenty of reasons to be proud of the organization they have built over the past five years.

But as the organization marks its first landmark anniversary, nothing makes TCP's leaders light up quite like discussing the students the program has reached.

"We receive letters all the time from students telling us how the program has made a difference in their lives," said Dan Perkins, founder of TCP. "When you read them, it brings tears to your eyes."

The Challenge Program seeks to motivate students to improve their performance at school by providing financial incentives for successes they achieve while at the same time connecting them with successful business people from their community who act as school sponsors.

The program works with students in grades 10 through 12, offering awards in four categories: Most improved grades, attendance, community service, and best overall grade point average.

And the program has reached many more students after five

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years in existence than organizers originally believed. Perkins said the group's first five-year plan had TCP working with 50 to 60 schools by year five and instead the program has a presence in 109.

Perkins said TCP is now working with more than 140,000 students in 20 counties covering three states, awarding them more than \$1 million since May of 2004. Furthermore, the program has a waiting list of nearly 40 schools that will welcome TCP once funding is secured to expand the program.

"This has been five years of hard work and dedication on the part of so many people," said Barb Grandinetti, executive director of the program. "But the level of dedication among our people has been so high because we knew we were making a difference in these kids' lives."

TCP will mark its anniversary with a banquet on May 1 at Pitt-Johnstown's Living Learning Center. The program will honor the George Zamias Family and Zamias Services Inc., charter members as sponsors.

Also on the evening of the banquet, TCP will initiate a "Golden Owl Award" based on the symbol of the academic wise owl. It will be given to those who exhibit the highest commitment to the mission of TCP.

Proceeds from the event will fund TCP's continued work. It will also provide a launching pad toward the organization's goal of taking the program to every school in the state.

"How quickly this program expands will depend greatly on funding," Perkins said.

"We want to serve the entire state and we're pushing hard in the eastern side of the state to achieve that goal. And we're starting to see some real positive feedback on those efforts.

"Ultimately, our goal is to take this nationwide. But we know we have to take it one step at a time."