



# Challenging the Dropout Crisis

## Developing Our Work Force

BY MARY DRELISZAK

**THE DROPOUT RATE** in the United States is a national crisis that is having a significant effect on the Mountain State. Approximately one in four West Virginia students entering high school each year will not graduate, meaning that approximately 6,900 West Virginia high school students will drop out this year alone. The numbers are staggering, revealing the monumental nature of the challenge. The failure of so many youth to complete a basic high school education has deep-rooted moral, social and economic consequences that can last a lifetime.

A deficiency of skilled, engaged workers capable of problem solving has become a barrier to West Virginia's long-term economic development. Consequently, improving the high school dropout rate is closely tied to West Virginia's future economic success. Community business leaders recognize that they have a vested interest in ensuring a continued flow of qualified workers, and many are willing to engage in pipeline projects like The Challenge Program (TCP) to build West Virginia's work force.

The goal of The Challenge Program is to partner with businesses to motivate high school students to excel both in and out of the classroom. This partnership creates good habits in high school students and provides businesses with tangible results for their investments.

TCP was founded in a school in Johnstown, PA during the 2003-2004 school year by Dan Perkins and Executive Director Barbara Grandinetti as a means to confront the student dropout crisis in a high-impact way. The program promotes a school culture that fosters academics and high expectations for all.

TCP is currently active in more than a dozen West Virginia high schools. At each of the participating schools, four students from each of the sophomore, junior and senior classes are awarded a \$250 check when they rise to the top of their class in one or more of following categories: attendance, academic improvement, academic excellence and community service. Twelve awards totaling \$3,000 are given at each school.

All students who rank in the top 10 percent of each category are eligible to receive the award. The schools choose the winners from a random drawing of those who make it to the top percentile of each award category. The only exception to the top 10 percent eligible students is in the

Chesapeake Energy's Phil Pflister at John Marshall High School during an awards presentation.

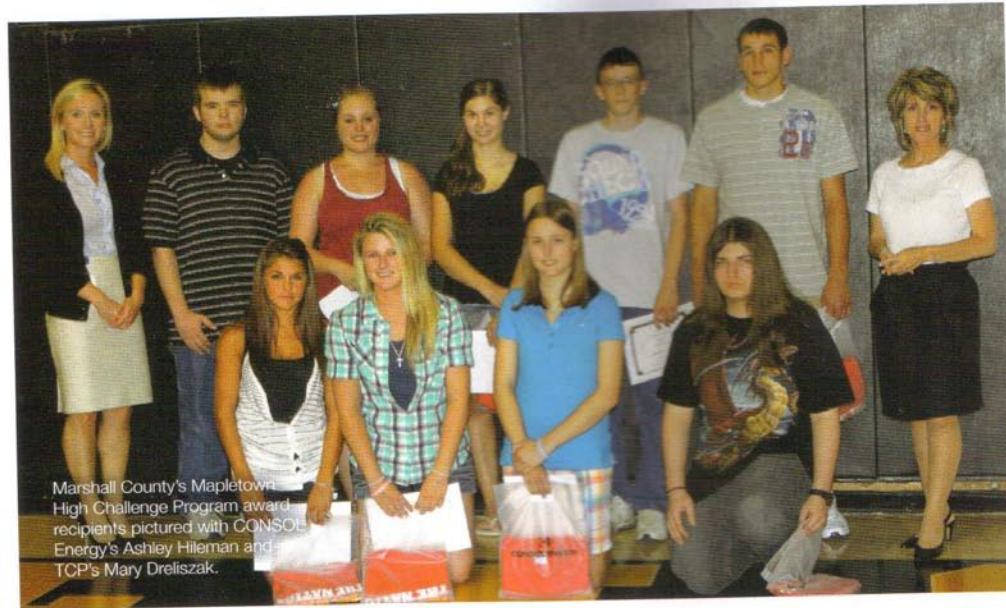


## 2011 TCP Sponsors

Chesapeake Energy  
CONSOL Energy  
Dow Chemical Company - West Virginia Operations  
MATRIC Research  
NGK Spark Plugs USA  
NiSource  
Select Energy Services  
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## 2011 West Virginia Participating Schools

Brooke County High School  
Buckhannon-Upshur High School  
Cameron High School  
Herbert Hoover High School  
Hundred High School  
John Marshall High School  
Lewis County High School  
Lincoln High School  
Magnolia High School  
Nitro High School  
Sissonville High School  
South Charleston High School  
Valley High School  
Wayne High School

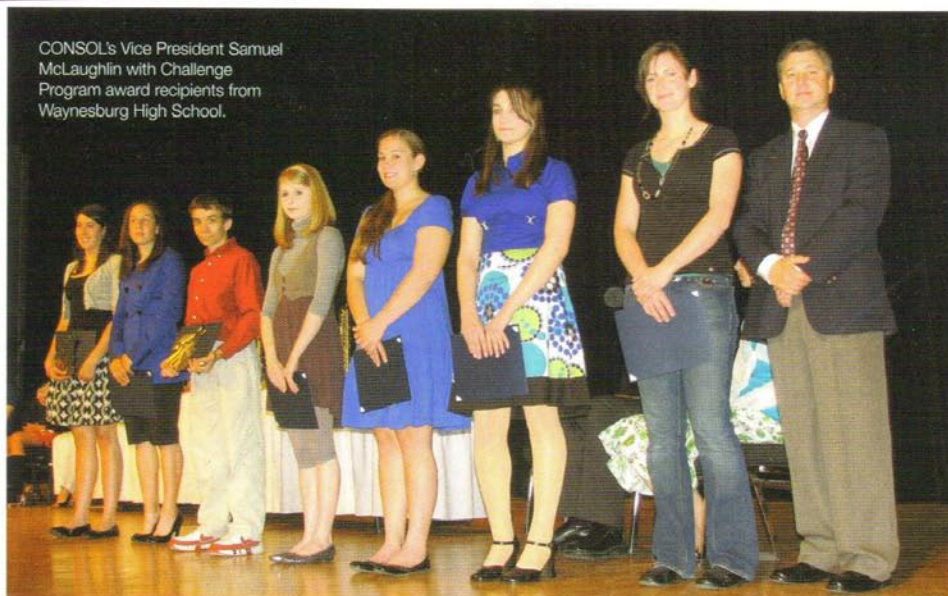


attendance category. For this award, The Challenge Program is looking for students with perfect attendance.

"In the process of trying to win the \$250," says Darrin Blake, a winner of the program's academic improvement award, "I pushed my grade point average up. Now college seems a little closer, a goal I can possibly achieve."

TCP sponsors have the unique opportunity to participate in the spring

and fall program assemblies, giving them a means to engage students, faculty, staff and parents. In addition to the assemblies, TCP sponsors benefit from the enhanced community presence received through program press releases, school announcements, business and school e-newsletters, Web site articles and social media. Companies oftentimes take advantage of the opportunity to inform students of available employment



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internships, mentoring programs and job shadowing. Because TCP is a 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization, the investment is tax deductible.

Phil Pfister, community development coordinator for Chesapeake Energy, attends the assemblies to speak in the five West Virginia schools the company sponsors. He remarked, "TCP is simple and is truly accessible to all students. It provides a very effective way to introduce our company

and our industry. Additionally, through TCP we can offer effective and substantial incentives and rewards."

Since 2003, through the generous support of businesses, foundations and individuals, TCP has been introduced to more than 270,000 students and has awarded checks totaling more than \$1.7 million to more than 5,000 deserving high school students in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Delaware and West Virginia.

TCP is actively seeking partners for schools currently awaiting sponsors. For more information about The Challenge Program, Inc., visit [www.tcpinc.org](http://www.tcpinc.org). ■

*Photography by Chesapeake Energy and CONSOL Energy*

