

Article published September 19, 2015

Businesses, schools unite Program helps form partnerships

GG By Phillip Rau
Eagle Staff Writer

A regional nonprofit organization that focuses on partnerships between business and education has been visiting high schools in Butler County and working to connect students with companies seeking to fill job openings and promote professional behavior and attitudes.

The Challenge Program will be at Butler County Area Vocational-Technical School Thursday as part of a series of events that seek to motivate students to develop career-ready attitudes and skills.

The organization has assemblies for sophomores, juniors and seniors that are sponsored by businesses.

The purpose, said spokesman Kayla Washko, is to connect employers in fast-growing industries with schools and students interested in career opportunities.

Businesses in the program usually pick a school they are interested in working with, and the agency collects data from both institutions to determine common interests.

This school year the program has had an event at Seneca Valley High School sponsored by Westinghouse.

On Oct. 21, it will visit Moniteau High School. That session and the one at the vo-tech are sponsored by XTO Energy.

Later, the program will have an event at Karns City High School sponsored by Quality Life Services, which runs a series of elder care facilities.

Washko said that despite the wide variety of businesses tapping the program, the concerns of many companies are the same.

"I think what we're hearing a lot is that it is difficult to find employees who (are professional) and have those basic skills of improving on the job and going above and beyond their job description," Washko said of what businesses are telling the agency. Washko said schools are often surprised at the demand for skills-related jobs and how technologically advanced many industries have become.

The program uses cash awards to encourage students to compete in five categories: Attendance, community service, academic improvement, academic excellence, and STEM. The coordination between school and business can be as brief as the assembly, or extend to job-shadowing or facility tour opportunities for students.

"It really depends on the business and the school," Washko said.

She said interest in the county in the program is significant because of the types of businesses — XTO is an energy company and Quality Life Services a health care services provider — that have expressed interested in high school students.

“We really try to focus on getting businesses that are worried about their future workforce, and we’re really excited to work with these kind of high-growth industries,” Washko said. The Challenge Program was founded in 2003 in Johnstown, Pa., and has reached nearly 500,000 students in Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia, according to the organization.

[Back](#)