

# OPPORTUNITIES and Challenges

The Challenge Program helps prepare  
local students for future workforce

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By Steve Halvonik



Progeny Systems is making torpedoes in Bentleyville. Dynamet Inc. is making titanium wire and coils in Washington and Range Resources, Noble Energy and MarkWest Energy Partners, L.P. are always looking for engineers, marketers, accountants and IT experts.

Even during sluggish economic times there are many good jobs that go unfilled because applicants lack the necessary job skills or the knowledge that they exist.

Maria Campieri is working hard to fix that. She is a program development manager for The Challenge Program Inc., a non-profit that is connecting regional employers with local high schools in an attempt to encourage and motivate students to develop work habits required for success and to introduce students to career paths and opportunities in their communities.

The fate of our region depends on the success of connecting business with education.

According to a recent study, 1.2 million workers will need to be hired or trained over the next decade to fill job vacancies created by retiring baby boomers. As things now stand, Western Pennsylvania "lacks a deep pipeline of younger talent."

"In our 10-county region we will experience a workforce crisis," Campieri said. "We will have exciting new job opportunities and lack of qualified workforce to fill the positions. We need to retain the graduating high school students."

So far, 113 school districts and nearly 100 businesses from the tri-state are participating in The Challenge Program. That includes 13 school districts and eight business partners in Washington County. Campieri said her goal is to have the program in 150 schools in Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia.

The Challenge Program provides a "unique opportunity" to schools and businesses alike, said Campieri.

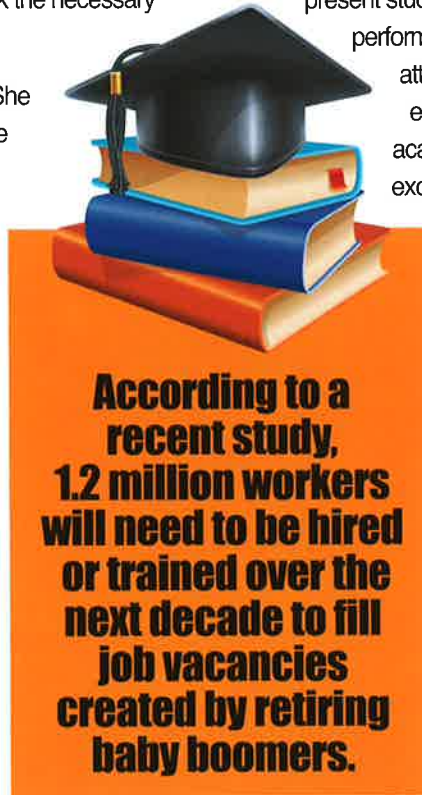
"It gives businesses another opportunity to give back to their community, showcase their business to our future workforce, facilitate workforce connections with schools and introduce students to careers in our local communities."

*At left, Maria Campieri and Canon-McMillan students*

## Here is how The Challenge Program works:

Businesses choose to partner with a participating school. The Challenge Program Inc. is an approved Educational Improvement Tax Credit Program. Businesses have the opportunity to directly address a student assembly, participate in workforce related activities with students and educators and present students with cash incentives for outstanding performance in five Challenge Program categories:

attendance, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), community service, academic improvement and academic excellence.



The goal, Campieri said, is to motivate students to develop strong work habits in areas necessary for success.

Alumni winners in The Challenge Program include a facilities engineer at Rice Energy, a shop mechanic at FirstEnergy, a nurse at Wheeling Hospital, a PhD candidate at Georgia Tech, a pizza shop co-owner and city councilman in Connellsville and an operations technician at Williams.

"There are a lot of opportunities to make a difference in this world," said Jacquelyn Wiggins, a volunteer firefighter and college student who won

The Challenge Program's community service award at Monessen High School in 2013. "By winning this award, it reinforced to my classmates and I that there is time to help your communities."

Campieri, an Elizabeth-Forward High School graduate, brings the perfect blend of salesmanship and academic experience to her role as a program development manager. She attended Southeastern Louisiana University, where she obtained a bachelor's degree in secondary social studies education. She was working at a Westmoreland County non-profit when she was recruited to The Challenge Program by a former principal where she had worked as a high school teacher.

With the school year in full swing, Campieri said she is "having fun connecting our business partners and schools during our busy assembly season. I look forward to facilitating meaningful experiences throughout the school year."

**For more information about The Challenge Program, please contact Maria Campieri at [campierim@tcpinc.org](mailto:campierim@tcpinc.org).**