

State workforce leader visits GapVax; hears about partnership with Challenge Program, local school districts

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JOHNSTOWN, PA. – As she toured the GapVax Inc. facility in the Moxham section of Johnstown, state Department of Community and Economic Development Director of Workforce Development Initiatives Gwen Ross was not only impressed by the business, but also the growing partnership among the company, Forest Hills School District and The Challenge Program.

“(A) great example of public- private partnership meeting the needs of the community,” she said.

Ross was in town to get a firsthand look at the school-to-career pathways The Challenge Program has created through the Students in the Workforce initiative, which is funded by a DCED grant.

To date, TCP has facilitated 15 partnerships between local schools and area businesses to not only make students aware of the numerous family- sustaining careers in their backyard, but also to help companies fill vacancies for skilled labor.

“The work being done through The Challenge Program is life-changing for these students,” Ross said.

Tuesday’s tour started in the finishing area of GapVax, which builds vacuum trucks at its facility in the Moxham section of Johnstown, before moving through the rest of the building.

Members of the tour group, which featured Forest Hills administrators and students and TCP representatives, were given a breakdown of the operations by GapVax Senior Vice President of Sales Matt Hughes.

Violet Estok, a junior at Forest Hills, was fascinated by the walk-through, but had her eye on the marketing department, which she was shown at the end.

“It’s a cool opportunity,” she said of the tour and partnership.

Estok was introduced to GapVax through The Challenge Program and was impressed by the offerings.

She wants to job-shadow at the company this school year, then apply for a summer job to work there.

As for the pathway from school to career, Estok said the bridge provides less stress for students searching for jobs after school and also means no job hunting.

Alexis Logue, a sophomore at the school, said she appreciated the opportunity to explore a local employer’s offerings while in school and hearing about different available careers.

She’s interested in the painting and welding departments at GapVax and is interested in applying for the cooperative agreement to work there while in school.

In addition to touring the facility, the state representatives got to meet a product of the Students in the Workforce initiative – Brandon James.

He graduated from Forest Hills in June and was offered a full-time job at GapVax after working there part-time during school.

James said the transition was easy, and it was satisfying to work through the program.

“I’m very happy (about) how everything worked out,” he said.

Getting to see a former student in the workforce and knowing that the program works was “gratifying,” Forest Hills Superintendent David Lehman said.

Through his administration’s leadership, the district is not only embracing The Challenge Program’s pathways, but also updating curriculum to meet the needs of local employers to ensure students can stay in the area after graduation.

Lehman said the businesses and Forest Hills are learning from each other and a lot of hard work went into getting everything in place for success.

Barbara Grandinetti, TCP president, agreed.

She said knowing the amount of work that went into developing the workplace initiative and seeing its success is similar to watching a child grow up, adding that it's a "labor of love."

Making a difference in the next generation's lives and providing opportunities for family sustaining jobs is fulfilling, Grandinetti said.

She added that she is appreciative of DCED's funding of the program.