

PITTSBURGH BUSINESS TIMES

THE CHALLENGE PROGRAM

Partnering businesses with high school students

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A Johnstown-based program to open high school students' eyes to career opportunities in their communities by connecting them with area businesses is intensifying efforts in Allegheny County.

The Challenge Program Inc. builds partnerships that contribute to workforce and economic development and rewards students who go above and beyond with a financial incentive. It recently opened an office at 429 Fourth Ave. in downtown Pittsburgh, its first bricks-and-mortar site outside Johnstown, and hired Robert Sherwin as director of business in Allegheny County.



Grandinetti

"We've been in Pittsburgh for over 10 years, and when we go there, people are excited about what we're doing – and then we come back to Johnstown," Barbara Grandinetti, TCP president, said. "We felt this was the right time for us financially ... and that it was important for us to open an office and have people on the ground."

The goal is to partner with all of the county's 60-plus schools and increase outreach to

local companies.

"What's exciting about the Pittsburgh office is we're located in the center of the business and government area and can begin the outreach to businesses to become major corporate sponsors and make local foundations aware of who we are and what we do," Sherwin said. "We're also able



to talk to local government officials on how we can enhance and develop the next-generation workforce."

The downtown office is also a prototype: TCP wants to add similar offices in Harrisburg and other cities across the commonwealth and then enter adjoining states.

TCP was launched in 2003 by Daniel Perkins, CEO of MTS Technologies, and Grandinetti, vice president at Crown American Real Estate Trust and PREIT. Perkins chairs TCP's board. It started with one school and now works with 130. The aim was to keep students in school and help them excel by providing incentives.

The program awards students in grades 10-12 in five categories – attendance, STEM, community service, academic improvement and academic excellence. At each school, 15 students – five each from the sophomore, junior and senior classes – in the top 10 percent of those categories get a reward.

"The students take a survey and are entered into a drawing for a \$200 check," Grandinetti said.

She calls it the icing on the cake. The money comes from TCP's sponsors in the business community, contributions and fundraising efforts. Basically, a business makes a financial commitment to a single school of \$5,000.

"Of that, \$3,000 goes back to the kids in the awards categories," Grandinetti said.

Businesses can work with multiple schools, develop customized programs and, since they're eligible for tax benefits for their contributions, dip their finger in the frosting as well.

Since its inception, TCP has reached more than 500,000 students in Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Ohio and awarded more than \$3 million.

But the focus has increasingly embraced

workforce development and presenting a more direct route to jobs. Internship programs are gaining momentum and are something TCP wants to increase, Grandinetti said.

Over the past two years, 29 high school graduates have received full-time or part-time employment, summer employment and/or summer internships with their business partners.

Riggs Industries, the business partner for Somerset County Technology Center for the past decade, hired two graduates as welders at a subsidiary company in late May. Uniontown-based COE Distributing, business partner for four schools in Fayette County and one in Washington County, launched an internship program in summer 2018 with four students participating.

And Shadyside-based Guardian Storage sponsored "Guardian Storage Week" at Parkway West to raise awareness regarding employment opportunities. Students at Parkway West Career & Technology Center in Oakdale were involved in an open house and ribbon cutting event in partnership with the Pittsburgh Airport Chamber. Tasks included preparing and serving the menu, assisting with parking and tours, and designing marketing materials. Then the students participating in job shadowing opportunities with Guardian Storage.

Tony Bucci, chairman of advertising agency Marc USA, has been involved with TCP for more than three years and serves on its board.

"TCP has an amazing purpose and wonderful results," Bucci said. "It's about encouraging kids to stay in school and do well."

Marc became one of the school sponsoring companies, working with two within Pittsburgh Public Schools.

"We did a program in each, funded the financial awards given to kids who successfully complete the programs and coordinated bringing about 20 kids to the office to see what a real work environment is like," Bucci said.