

The Challenge Program Inc.: Meeting Workforce and Education Needs in Allegheny County

By Anna Gibbs

Since 2010, national and regional studies have been ringing the bell about a shortage of skilled and qualified employees coming our way. The future is now here. Employers are currently experiencing the challenge to fill open positions today.

The Challenge Program, Inc., a Johnstown-based program since 2003, is making strides toward meeting workforce development needs. The organization raises awareness with a focus on the next workforce population — high school students. An active and hands-on program, the



Challenge Program partners with local businesses and more than 100 Pennsylvania schools to implement a unique brand of workforce education and regional career awareness. In September 2018, TCP opened its first satellite office at 429 Fourth Avenue in downtown Pittsburgh with a short-

range strategic plan to partner with all of Allegheny County's 60-plus secondary schools and attract more local companies to help them educate students about the opportunities the region offers. "We've been serving Allegheny County for over 10 years and we felt it was important for us to open an office in Pittsburgh and have people on the ground," said TCP President Barbara Grandinetti. "There is a lot of opportunity in

this region and students need to know their options."

An academic motivational program for students in grades 10 to 12, TCP was designed to challenge students to compete in five award categories — Attendance, Community Service,



Barbara Grandinetti, TCP president and Shawn Kaufman, Riggs Industries HR director, pictured shaking hands, created the first media "Signing Day" for students committing to employment. 2018 Somerset CTC graduates/Riggs employees are Andrew Findley and Russell Persuhn, pictured in the blue shirts.

"Riggs has been forced to turn away contracts because the company doesn't have a large enough workforce to handle the work. These two young men are trailblazers. We hope they are the first of many to take this route."

— Shawn Kaufman/Riggs Industries

Academic Improvement, Academic Excellence and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), all of which are geared to help instill solid work habits that will prepare them for success in school and along their chosen career path.

A key component of the program is workforce development, with a mission of connecting business and education. Together,



These two students graduated from Admiral Peary AVTS. They applied to Gardner Denver (business sponsor for Admiral Peary) and applied for positions with the organization and were hired upon graduation.

the private sector and educational institutions work together to teach students about employment opportunities in the communities where students live; as well as the pathways they need to explore to obtain the job they desire.

Telling students is one thing. Showing them makes it real. TCP facilitates workforce activities between businesses, educators and students that include facility tours, innovative field trips such as breakfast with the CFO

“ Make a mistake on a test and receive a poor grade, but it’s different in the corporate world. If you make a mistake, it could be costly for the company. ”

– Amanda — Purchasing Intern/COE Distributing

Amanda is now considering Business as a second major.

and lunch-and-learn sessions with company employees. There are also Business Partner Weeks, which can be created by each business to engage and develop name recognition among the students; as well as industry-related classroom presentations, project-based learning activities, and of course, job-shadowing/internships.

The results? Jobs for qualified high school graduates. At manufacturing facility Gardner Denver, and at Williams Energy, a simple facility tour sparked the interest of career and technology students to apply for open positions. Two graduates were hired full-time with Gardner Denver and another was hired as an intern with Williams, which led to a permanent position. G.A.P. Federal Credit Union implemented a student-run kiosk in the cafeteria of their partnered school. Students are eligible for training after they take a financial literacy class and are encouraged to apply for work after graduation. To date, eight graduates have been hired for full/part-time and seasonal employment.

Two of TCP’s major corporate partners, Corle Building Systems in Bedford County and COE Distributing in Fayette County, developed, with TCP, eight summer learning/intern positions between them. The applicant pool is




Major Corporate Partner, Corle Building Systems in Bedford County, hosted a tour of Bedford County Technology Center students.

interested senior students who are finalists in any Challenge Program award category*, creating a pipeline of qualified candidates for these companies.

To bring attention to the skills gap in manufacturing, TCP and business partner Riggs Industries created a media “Signing Day” event for two career and technology graduates who committed to work for the company. The event was so well received, it was duplicated with COE Distributing’s first four summer interns later that spring.

“We are anxious to see workforce success throughout the regions we service,” Grandinetti says. “We are increasing workforce connections between students and high growth industries. We are addressing the workforce crisis with raised awareness.” Grandinetti says TCP’s long-range plans include additional offices in Harrisburg and eastern Pennsylvania, and they plan to eventually have a presence in every school throughout the state. “Having our people working with community businesses and schools will translate into jobs for young talent, keeping them in Pennsylvania.”

If you are a Pennsylvania business wondering how to overcome the challenge of recruiting, or a secondary school who wants their students to successfully achieve opportunities in their community, call The Challenge Program, Inc. at 814 533.9401. 

**Finalists are a group of students who meet or exceed the criteria for each individual award category. These finalists are eligible to apply for summer positions at Corle and COE.*

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