

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

The Challenge Program, Inc., has been a Johnstown-based program since 2003. Their mission is to build sustainable Business and Education partnerships while introducing students to careers in their communities. These partnerships contribute to workforce and economic development while motivating students to develop the solid work habits required to succeed in school and in their future careers. The organization opened its first satellite office in 2018, in downtown Pittsburgh. The Challenge Program, Inc. (TCP) is making strides in meeting the needs of workforce development by raising awareness with the next workforce population – high school students. An active and hands-on program, they implement a unique brand of workforce education and regional career awareness with the partnership of local businesses in more than 100 Pennsylvania schools. Currently, The Challenge Program partners with six businesses sponsoring 11 high schools and one career and technology center in Washington County.

The Challenge Program, Inc. is committed to achieving 100% active participation of all Washington County high schools, partnered with the vast diversity of businesses in that region. “It is a golden opportunity for any business to partner with and sponsor a high school,” states Barbara Grandinetti, President of The Challenge Program, Inc. “We are able to open the front door to the future workforce for Washington County.”

The Challenge Program, Inc. is a motivational program for all students, grades 10-12. The program challenges students to compete in five award categories - Attendance, Community Service, Academic Improvement, Academic Excellence, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). TCP incentivizes students in these categories regardless of past academic performance. Any student can choose to challenge themselves and have an opportunity to achieve success. TCP communicates the award categories as solid work habits for school and career success.

The program's natural progression embraces workforce development as a key component. The unique one-on-one connection between Washington County business and schools exhibits employment opportunities in the county where students live and the pathways to obtaining jobs.

Telling students about why what they are learning today will be useful tomorrow is one thing; showing them makes it real. TCP facilitates workforce activities between businesses, educators, and students. Hundreds of students and educators have learned about companies in Washington County through facility tours and innovative events such as lunch-and-learn sessions, “Business Partner Week”, industry-related classroom presentations, project-based learning activities, and job-shadowing and internships.

The results are jobs for qualified high school graduates. Williams Energy hosted a simple facility tour sparking the interest of students to work for Williams. Williams and TCP developed a summer internship application for interested students, including an essay, and conducted formal interviews. Garrett Felgar was offered a summer internship which was extended to December and turned into a permanent job offer. He told TCP that it felt like he, “hit the jackpot!”

AUMA Actuators, business sponsor for Canon-McMillan High School conducted a student tour and classroom presentation. Range Resources sponsors Burgettstown High School, Bentworth High School, Fort Cherry High School, Avella High School, and Western Area CTC. They have conducted STEM projects and community service projects including giving culinary students an opportunity to practice their skillful talents.

“The direction of The Challenge Program, Inc. today is exciting,” says Grandinetti. “It is promising to see the increasing workforce activities success throughout the regions we service, especially in high growth industries. We are addressing, and affecting, the workforce crisis with raised awareness.” She continues, “Having our people working with community businesses and schools will translate into jobs for young talent, keeping them in their communities.”

Additional Washington County businesses supporting high schools in the county through The Challenge Program, Inc. are Alex E. Paris (Avella HS), cfsbank (Ringgold HS), Dynamet Incorporated (Washington HS), Progeny Systems (Belle Vernon and Charleroi High Schools). COE Distributing out of Fayette County supports California High School in Washington County.

If you are a Washington County 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- 7401 x104 and speak with Sara Jones, Director of Program Development.