

Offering a Second Chance

School-to-work program for at-risk students slated to begin next fall

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Most of them have little chance of graduating from a traditional high school - you know the type, students who chafe against the structure of the traditional school day and struggle to find relevance in mathematical formulas and historic events.

Every school district has a few of them and most times they end up falling through the cracks in the system. Often, they end up as dropouts with few of the skills needed to earn and keep a job.

These are precisely the type of students Second Chance Partners for Education seeks.

"We don't pretend to be a savior for all at-risk kids," said Wayne Evert, academic coordinator for Second Chance. "We're just on the menu of the many ways (school districts) can help kids."

And now, thanks to the interest of at least two area school districts and the commitment of one local manufacturer, students in western Racine and Kenosha counties will get a shot at that second chance.

The program, which was started more than a decade ago by Generac Power Systems Inc. in Waukesha County, partners with school systems and private industry to create a manufacturing apprenticeship that includes work and classroom components.

Second year high school students who are credit deficient, have a mechanical aptitude and support from parents are selected for the 21-month program that provides valuable on-the-job training with pay as well as accredited classroom study that results in a high school diploma.

According to Evert, Second Chance has administrative support from both the Burlington Area School District and the Waterford Union High School District and will soon be up for school board approval in both districts. Second Chance officials are currently working on a similar arrangement with the Westosha Union High School District in Kenosha County.

Lavelle steps up

For the private industry component, Lavelle Industries, a Burlington-based manufacturer of rubber and plastic parts mainly for the plumbing world, has stepped up with a commitment for jobs and classroom space to get the local program up and running at the start of next school year.

"Lavelle has been incredible (in embracing the program)," Evert said.

The company, headed by Rhonda Sullivan, who is active in several local school and community causes, will accept up to eight students next school year (two or three from each of the participating districts).

She said the program offered a great opportunity to partner with the local school system. While her top objective is serving students, Sullivan said, "I like that youth are in a manufacturing setting and considering it as a career."

Another Lavelle official echoed those comments.

"It's part of our passion for supporting the community and specifically the youth of the community," said Gloria Bergmann, director of human resources for Lavelle. "We see the program as unique in serving a group of (students) who otherwise might be forgotten."

Bergmann said aside from the opportunity to serve the youth of the community the company is able to create a "recruiting pipeline" to potential future employees who are well suited to a manufacturing environment.

Although the fine details of the Lavelle site are still being worked out, Bergmann anticipates students will gain experience in several areas, including working as laboratory technicians, assistants in research and development, quality control and maintenance apprentices.

According to Evert, participating businesses like Lavelle are able to hire the students at a lower cost than a regular employee or a temporary service worker.

"The pay scale starts at minimum wage and by the time they graduate (and leave the program) they'll be at entry level," he said.

Another outlet for schools

For school districts the program is one more tool to reach students who don't fit the typical high school mold.

"Our programs don't fit all kids," said Ron Jandura, superintendent of the Burlington Area School District. "What Second Chance does is it immediately shows the kids the relevance of their education."

Jandura said he'd been pursuing the program for several years and was glad to see it come to local fruition when Evert, who formerly served as an assistant principal at Burlington High School, took his current post with Second Chance last fall.

The cost to the district is about \$6,400, the same as if a student transfers to another district under the state's open enrollment program. Because the district receives roughly \$10,000 from the state for each student, it's not a money-losing proposition for local taxpayers. Also, because only a maximum of three students participate, it has no impact on staffing levels at the school.

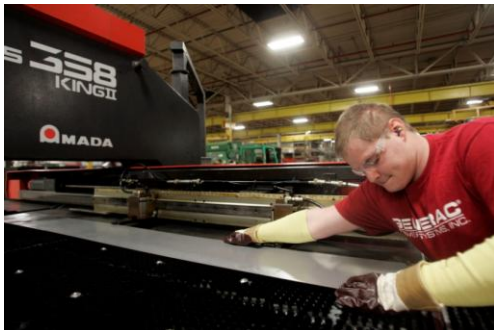
"I'm just hoping that we get the right kids into it and they last the entire program," Jandura said.

According to Evert the school district helps identify students who might benefit from the program and Second Chance hosts an open house in the spring of the school year during which eligible sophomores can apply.

"They fill out an application and it starts mirroring the job process," he said.

Specific students are then selected to participate in a panel interview with representatives from Second Chance, the school district and the participating industries.

A home visit is scheduled during the summer for those who make the cut to ensure they have the parental support to succeed in the program. Like other employees in a manufacturing setting, the students must pass a drug screen before being accepted.



Second Chance Partners for Education student Jordan Vail works on the manufacturing floor at Generac Power Systems plant in Eagle. Second Chance Partners for Education is in the process of finalizing an arrangement with the Burlington Area School District and Lavelle Industries to establish a similar program here.

A whole new experience

A new class of students is welcomed in September and the students, who would otherwise be entering their junior years, are committed to the program for 21 consecutive months. When they're done, they are able to graduate with a diploma from their regular high school. In the meantime, those who wish to participate in extracurricular activities at their regular school retain that option.

"Most of the kids are disenfranchised with normal school, but we do have some who participate in sports," Evert said.

A typical day at the worksite includes two hours of classroom work, two hours of training/mentorship and four hours on the job. On-site, accredited teachers are provided through the Cooperative Educational Service Agency No. 1.

Evert said classroom courses are aligned with state standards and all students are also enrolled in the state's youth apprenticeship program. The program offers a variety of courses that are all geared toward a manufacturing perspective, such as: Math for the Trades; Workplace Environmental Sciences; Computer Aided Drafting; and Financial Literacy.

The students are all issued laptop computers, which they in turn pay for via a payroll deduction. Both their teachers and their work supervisors also rate them daily on a scale of 1-4. Students receiving 1s could face the prospect of having their paycheck docked until things improve.

Evert said he's seen the program work wonders for students who had little use for school.

Jasen Suszek, a program participant from Mukwonago High School, provided a powerful testimonial of the program's benefits.

"It really gives us the chance to prove to people that we can do it," he said. "This program has many positive benefits like getting paid and learning job skills. I've learned many social skills including the importance of being professional and respectful in the workplace."

Corey Gamroth welds a part as he works at Generac Power Systems in Eagle. He is a student in the Second Chance partners for Education program that places at-risk students in a specialized work and classroom environment.

