

Businesses helping youths graduate from high school



Four young men who participated in the Menomonee Falls chapter of Second Chance Partners for Education pose for photos after their graduation banquet at Davians Banquet & Conference Center in Menomonee Falls. Teacher Doug Baisley (left) accompanies (from second left) Ryan Schroeffer, Garrett Crish, Shawn Pivotto and Wayne Hoerig.

By Erin Richards of the Journal Sentinel

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Garrett Crish never had high hopes for high school.

With no drive to do homework and nobody at home on his tail about getting it done (his mom worked multiple jobs, and his dad was out of the picture), Crish figured he'd take things easy and work at a fast-food restaurant.

Instead, thanks to a 21-month alternative high school program for struggling juniors that continues to expand in Waukesha and Washington counties, Crish walked across a stage with other Menomonee Falls High School students this year to receive his diploma.

As part of the Second Chance Partners for Education program, students such as Crish are paid to work at local manufacturing plants and acquire enough credits at the same time for high school graduation, giving them motivation and a real-world application for their academics.

Second Chance recently expanded to take in students from Germantown and Milton high schools, and organizers are working to build partnerships between businesses and schools in Racine and Milwaukee.

In Germantown, J.W. Speaker Corp., a lighting systems company, has just allocated space for a new Second Chance classroom at its new facility.

Previously, Second Chance students who worked at J.W. Speaker had to travel back to Menomonee Falls to attend class at Tailored Label Products, which has an on-site classroom.

"This serves a population of students who are more hands-on, who just don't fit into the mold of the traditional classroom," said Germantown High School Assistant Principal Dave Towers, who enrolled three students in the Second Chance program at the beginning of this school year. Towers said the school will likely get to put five or six juniors into the program at the beginning of the 2009-'10 school year.

Unlike other high school students who are gearing up for summer vacation, the Second Chance youths - including the new Germantown students, who are nine months into the program - will continue working and going to class through the summer.

"For other administrators, I'd say this is another great partnership that you can develop with your community, and another tool you can have that can help kids to graduate," Towers said.

Funding for Second Chance comes from two main sources: state money that follows the child into the program, and business funds. Participating companies pay about \$12,000 to educate each student in the program. That price includes the student's wages over 21 months and the cost of the materials and classroom instructor, supplied by the regional Cooperative Educational Service Agency.

Second Chance organizers point out that the costs to employ a student are substantially less than hiring a new full-time employee, and that the businesses benefit from training a younger workforce that will be needed to replace aging baby boomers.

"This takes a lot more work than writing a check to a good cause," said Mike Erwin, president of Second Chance partner Tailored Label Products.

"It's a significant investment, and you have to believe in your heart that you're going to make an impact in at least one young person," Erwin said. "You can't be someone who is focused solely on the financial performance of the business without being more socially engaged and involved in the community."

Because of the current economic downturn, Second Chance Executive Director Stephanie Borowski said, new business partners have been reluctant to commit.

But, she added, presentations to members of the manufacturing community that could serve the Racine and Milwaukee areas, such as S.C. Johnson & Son Inc. and General Electric, have been well-received.

Because it takes several years to get the Second Chance program up and running, Borowski and other Second Chance officials are working to get new partnerships in place so that they're ready when the economy picks up.

"As we look at Milwaukee and we look at Racine, we've got an alarming drop-out rate," Borowski said. "Schools are coming to us looking for another solution. By September of 2010, we hope to be prepared with some new partnerships."

To date, about 75 students have graduated through the Second Chance program, Borowski said.

The program started in Jefferson County in 1996 at a Generac Power Systems Inc. plant but was moved to Generac's location in Waukesha in 2000, said Marty Gholston, Second Chance academic director.

Second Chance didn't organize as an official nonprofit until 2005.

A sustainable, replicable model for the Second Chance program, Gholston continued, includes about 14 students per classroom, and three to four other businesses that act as work site hosts. Those 14 students usually come from two or three area high schools.

On a recent weekday in Menomonee Falls, before the graduation ceremony for Second Chance on May 20 and 21, Crish and his fellow students sat in the classroom at Glendale Machining Inc., diagramming robotics components on a computer program.

Glendale Machining Inc. owner Dave Henning watched over their shoulders.

"At first, there's always a lot of whys - why am I doing this?" Henning said. "But once you for seven months, it's like a light bulb goes on. We've prepared them."



Second Chance partners

Frantz Machining, Generac Power Systems, Glendale Machining Inc., Great Lakes Packaging, Husco International, Industrial Towel and Uniform, J.W. Speaker, Tailored Label Products, The Brewer Company, ToolRite, Ultra Tool & Manufacturing, Waukesha Electric, Western States Envelope.

Education partners: Cooperative Educational Service Agency #1, Germantown, Elmbrook, Menomonee Falls, Milton, Mukwonago, New Berlin, Palmyra-Eagle, Waukesha, Whitewater.

