

Classrooms without walls

Second Chance program gives struggling students options in education

ANDREA BUDDÉ
CORRESPONDENT
Sunday, July 19, 2009



Second Chance student Tony Agen of Whitewater checks inventory at Husco in Whitewater as part of the alternative education program. (Photo by Matt Schwenke)

With the economy growing tough and competition for jobs growing fierce, graduating students in college, and even high school, need to have a competitive edge. This often leaves students who are falling behind, or who learn through alternative methods, at greater risk for joining the growing population of unemployed. Through the program Second Change Partners for Education, these high school students are given the chance to catch up, and even surpass, their classmates.

Second Chance was started in 2000 by Generac Power Systems, based out of Waukesha. The program was developed to create private

business and public school partnerships to create a non-traditional high school setting for students who learn better by hands on work. The students that this program serves are those at risk for not obtaining their high school diploma, and those at risk for dropping out.

"Even more than that, these students just really have different learning styles about them. They are much more hands on," Second Chance Executive Director Stephanie Borowski said.

The program initially started with 6 students in 2004, and has doubled its size every year since then.

"We have a very aggressive growth plan, mostly because of the need we see with these students. We understand that every community is in need of these programs," Borowski said.

Students participating in the program are still enrolled in their hometown high school. However, students attend class at the partnering site. Five different classrooms are set up at Generac Power Systems, which is the site for the program's Whitewater students. Students spend around 8 hours a day at Generac, typically from 7 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. After completing the required two hours of classroom time, students then work within Generac to gain hands on experience, and where students can earn income. Classes are run by fully trained, state certified teachers.

The courses that students are required to complete cover a broad area of learning. Classes include Blueprint Reading, High Performance Manufacturing, Financial Literacy for Teens, Communications in Business, Math for the Trades, Safety in the Workplace, Technology Tools, Workplace Readiness, Workplace Environmental Science, 20th Century Events, and Writing Skills.

"The teachers are ensuring that all criteria are met and exceeded," Borowski said. "There is no other program or educational model like Second Chance out there right now."

The program takes 21 months to complete with students only having breaks when the businesses are closed. The intense program is designed to make sure students get ahead and stay ahead. Students are expected to master each item of the curriculum before moving on to the next.

Financial aid for the program comes in part from the local school system, and the rest is covered by the company the students pair up with.

In addition to the school work and business work the students are expected to complete, students must become involved in the community; often giving talks around town, giving presentations to various groups in an effort to be model citizens.

Second Chance Partners can have many positive impacts on students beyond allowing them to obtain their high school diploma. Students also become prepared for life in the workforce, and learn what it takes to hold a job and to succeed in business. Students will leave the program with hands on training, as well as their diploma.

"I just think that is so powerful to take the burden off the students wondering how they will graduate," Borowski said.

With a 90 percent graduation rate, and a 98 percent attendance rate, the program seems to be making a positive impact on its students. However, in order to ensure more students have the Second Chance program available to them, more local businesses are needed to serve as a business partner.

"I was frustrated in high school and struggling in my courses. Now because of second chance I know I'm going somewhere in life," one Second Chance student said.

More information about Second Chance Partners for Education can be found at www.secondchanceyouth.org.

(Editor Matt Schwenke contributed to this story.)



Second Chance student Angel Lobach works along an assembly line at Generac in Whitewater. The Second Chance program pairs students who struggle in a typical educational setting with businesses who educate and train them on the job. (Photo by Matt Schwenke)