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Second Chance offers a real chance for Wisconsin youth

By [CRW](#) *Fri, May 8, 2009*



When Mike Erwin first heard about the Second Chance Youth Apprenticeship program, he was intrigued.

There was something that endeared me to it," says Erwin, president of Tailored Label Products in Menomonee Falls, of the educational program for at-risk juniors and seniors. "I empathized with them."

"Since then, he'd done more than empathize. Erwin, along with 15 other southeastern Wisconsin businesses, have given almost 100 students a needed entry into the working world.

According to Second Chance Executive Director Stephanie Borowski, the program is designed to pair non-traditional learners with the opportunity to earn and learn.

"We have a truly unique educational model in place," she says. "While our program targets high school students who are credit-deficient, sometimes they are bright, non-traditional learners."

To be considered for the program, students receive a recommendation from their high school and undergo a four-step interview process before a final decision is made. Not all applicants are selected for the program.

"We don't just go in and pluck them out of the high schools," says Borowski. "This is a big change for them; if they're accepted, they enter the adult work environment, but they still learn through a classroom component."

Erwin agrees and says that the transition often challenges the kids at first.

"We do a wee bit of babysitting," he admits, but sees value in the investment. "We're ramping up expectations: Our first rule is 'pull up your damn pants.' But this is a program that accelerates maturity. Every kid is different — our first student was a dismal failure, but our second one was an absolute gem right out of the box."

The 21-month Second Chance Youth Apprenticeship program actually had its start through a 1996 Generac expansion into the Jefferson/Ft. Atkinson area. At that time, the company

worked with the local schools to establish a similar partnership. However, a plant closing forced the discontinuation of the program.

Borowski says the program was revived in 2000 through a partnership with Mukwonago High School. It has since grown to include students from 12 different high schools, primarily in the western Milwaukee suburbs. Since then, 57 students have graduated from the program, which currently has 42 students.

Students in the program generally work and are paid for a 40-hour work week with two hours of traditional classroom time for general academic studies.

“We cross train our students,” says Erwin. “For example, they learn all aspects of the printing trade with us, from printing to finishing, inspecting and shipping.”

Partner businesses are required to provide student jobs that are appropriate and safe for students as well as a safe work environment.

“They can’t operate hoists or drive forklifts,” notes Borowski.

Second Chance is funded through a variety of sources, including business fees and donations, a per-pupil fee from participating high schools, grants and private foundations.

“The first year of the program is difficult to fund, but once there are 14 participating students on site, it’s a self-sustaining program,” says Borowski.

It’s also sustaining the interest of student participants.

“We have a 98-percent attendance rate and a 90-percent graduation rate, which is unmatched in programs like this,” she adds.

Upon graduation, students receive a diploma from their respective high school, articulated credits in the Wisconsin Technical College System, a Certificate of Occupational Proficiency from the Department of Workforce Development and 21 months of on-the-job work experience.

For more information about Second Chance, which is planning expansions into other Wisconsin communities, log on to www.secondchanceyouth.org.