

OTHER VIEWS

Helping Students Catch The Train

Jack (not his real name) was an average student at Gai-ther High School, living with his mother, a single parent. One day he came home from school to find a stolen TV in his apartment. His mother was arrested shortly thereafter. By the

time Jack got his life back together a couple of weeks had passed. He was hopelessly behind in school. He tried to catch up, but as he put it, "the train had passed me by. As much as I tried to catch up, I wasn't able to. It's not that the teachers didn't care, it's that the train was going at 60 mph and when I got back on it, it had left me."

Jack's story represents just one of thousands of students in Hillsborough County public schools who have been deemed "at-risk" because of a variety of factors. Jack got lucky; he was admitted to the Bowers/Whitley Career Center (BWCC). Our school district has established an effective system of four career centers specifically designed to assist "at-risk" students who have significant challenges outside school and need more than traditional school settings can offer. Students at these career centers spend half their day with individualized academic programming and the other half training towards a specific career (Web design, automobile mechanics, culinary arts, building construction technol-



GEORGE SEEGERS

Project SUCCESS pledges financial aid to at-risk students who obtain a career certificate, or further their education.

ogy, and nursing assistant programs to name a few).

The Hillsborough Education Foundation discovered that even with this very effective programming and dedicated faculty and staff in the career centers, there was a need to provide more to assure that students succeed.

This extends not only to completing their high school diploma, but to continue by either entering a career (with a certification) or with post-secondary school.

That was the idea behind the pilot program of Project SUCCESS, collaboration with the Eckerd Family Foundation and other community partners. Through Project SUCCESS we made the bold statement to all the students at Bowers/Whitley that if you want to obtain a career certificate, further your education at a school district post-secondary Technical Education Center, or go to community college, we'll help financially. The reality is that the students have enough challenges in their lives; we wanted to pave the way for their successful entry into a career where they can begin to give back.

The graduating class at Bowers/Whitley is approxi-

mately 100 each year. The year before this pilot project there were two graduates who pursued post-secondary education. The year we began Project SUCCESS, there were 23 graduates taking advantage of the scholarships. In addition, the attendance, graduation, and job placement rates all went up at Bowers/Whitley.

Jack opted to enter the auto mechanics career track and became extremely excited with what he learned at Bowers/Whitley. Jack graduated last year. He obtained his career certification and is now working at a local auto dealership.

Project SUCCESS is one of many programs in our community which work. Every student deserves to have this hope and to have the opportunity to pursue their education and a fulfilling career. We are certain that Project SUCCESS is a step in the right direction to help these students experience the happiness found in accomplishing their goals. More information is at www.educationfoundation.com.

George E. Seegers is chairman of the board of the Hillsborough Education Foundation.