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## Program preps teens for life outside school

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**Jess Saunders, 17, wants to learn the best way to land a good job.**

Brian Copeland, 18, is seeking advice about being successful in the “real world.”

Both students are participating in a pilot program for 15 seniors at Schuylkill Haven Area High School and learning the basic skills they will need to join the workforce.

The district is the first in the county to participate in the YES, or Your Employability Skills program, an initiative started at the high school in August.

“The purpose of YES is to prepare high school seniors to enter the workforce with the basic skills employers require,” said Sara Hodon, director of Workforce Development, which is coordinating the program. “There are similar programs in other districts, but none as comprehensive as this.”

The program was started in 1996 with a focus on adults, but was adapted for high school seniors in 2001. YES was introduced in Schuylkill County in February at a community kickoff event, which gave area educators, business leaders, and legislators a presentation on the advantages of including YES in a school’s curriculum.

According to Lori Hudak, director of curriculum and instruction, the Schuylkill Haven Area district became the first in the county to implement the program for the 2006-07 school year.

“The job markets are so competitive today — we thought that any program which would help to give our students an edge during the interview process was worth offering,” Hudak said “The YES program has a proven track record of success, and it’s been going very well here so far.”

Schuylkill County is the third in the state to offer the program, behind York and Erie Counties.

Both Pottsville Area and Mahanoy Area High Schools have signed on to offer the YES program beginning next school year, Hodon said.

According to business instructor Robert Boyle, the YES program is offered during the regular school day as a one-credit elective course, but it is not the typical “textbooks and tests” class.

“We watch videos and use technology in the classroom,” Boyle said. “We have guest speakers from the business community who volunteer to speak to the class on different subjects, from team-building skills to sexual harassment and substance abuse. It really gives the students a taste of what they’ll be experiencing in the workplace.”

Recently, Daniel L. Daub, administrator of Tremont Health And Rehabilitation Center, talked to the class about effective problem solving in the workplace.

“I see many graduates who don’t have the skills or training they need to get and keep a job,” he said. “They don’t know how to write a resume, or present well in an interview or launch a job search. I think this class will give these students an edge over other job applicants and the skills that employers look for when making a decision on hiring the best candidate for the job.”

Boyle said the program offers “life experience.”

“I can stand up in front of them and talk all day, but when a businessperson comes in and talks about how these issues apply to their jobs and to real life, it makes the class and the material much more meaningful,” he said.

The program also brings the students into local businesses, Boyle said.

“Part of the course curriculum requires four hours of business tours that help expose the students to the many businesses and industries in Schuylkill County,” he said. “This will give the students a chance to see the career paths available to them. They

can see these places firsthand and ask questions. They may find something that appeals to them which they never considered before.”

According to Hodon, YES graduates are viewed as “preferred applicants” in both York and Erie Counties.

In addition to completing the required coursework, demonstrating a 95 percent attendance rate and achieving a successful score on standard personnel and basic education tests, each student must also pass a six-panel drug screening before they can graduate from the program.

“The employer knows the applicant is both qualified and drug-free, which will help the employer save thousands on both training and drug-testing costs,” Hodon said.

The YES program is a collaborative effort of the Schuylkill Workforce Partnership, consisting of the Northeast PA Manufacturers and Employers Association, Pennsylvania CareerLink, PPL, Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce, Schuylkill County Commissioners, Schuylkill Economic Development Corporation and Schuylkill Intermediate Unit No. 29.

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