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IN DEPTH: EDUCATION & TRAINING

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Making an impact

CLAAY program connects students with mentors to guide career goals

[Candy Gola](#)

[Duquesne University](#) has spread its roots from Uptown into eight area high schools to help students develop a career plan and a better future.

The [Career Literacy for African American Youth](#) is an initiative of Duquesne University's Institute for Economic Transformation and has two clear-cut goals, according to Vernon Tipton, CLAAY program director.

"We're connecting the community to the schools," he said. "And we're making a difference in the lives of young people with job satisfaction and life satisfaction."

CLAAY pairs 150 students from five of the Pittsburgh Public Schools -- Allderdice, Langley, Oliver, Peabody and Perry Traditional Academy -- and Aliquippa, Beaver Falls and McKeesport high schools with their career mentors to reduce the academic and employment gaps faced by African-American high school students, according to program leaders.

The program, which is open to high school students in all grade levels, is primarily funded by the [Heinz Foundation](#), Mr. Tipton said. Rep. Mike Veon also was instrumental in helping the program move into Beaver County, according to Mr. Tipton.

As the high school calendar ends in early June, CLAAY will have finished its second year. It was launched during the fall of 2003 with 63 students in five Pittsburgh schools to impact the regional economy by providing high school youth -- the future work force -- with activities, career information and guidance to help them identify goals and how to reach them.

"We look at work force issues, what jobs are hot, which are not, and what students should study in high school to work toward the job they want," he said.

This fall, Mr. Tipton said he hopes to double the size of the program, adding another 100 students and 100 mentors to the program by recruiting in the schools before the close of the academic year.

He said most of the mentors in the program are lawyers.

"We recruited, and lawyers responded."

It's been a win-win situation, he said.

"Lawyers tend to be very systematic, so they're great at using resources and helping the students with resumes," he said.

Mr. Tipton's background, while varied, is not in law. He was a principal in the Wilkinsburg School District for 10 years before spending 23 years as an area manager at [Verizon](#), responsible for Pittsburgh, West Virginia,

Delaware and Maryland. He retired from Verizon and decided to pursue his doctorate in education from Duquesne in 2003.

"I took this on as my next job, I guess," he said. "I found out what kids wanted to do and what problems kept them from doing it," he said.

Five major problems included a lack of information about careers, a lack of understanding about jobs, a lack of uniform foundation, a lack of confidence, motivation and self-esteem, and a lack of financial means.

CLAAY has helped to close those gaps, he said, and when the program starts again in the fall he wants to have reached enough kids to make an economic change.

In order to grow the program, he will start to recruit students from the remaining Pittsburgh Public Schools, East Allegheny and "a few others," he said.

A mentor in the program, Raymond Conway, said the benefit is "offering kids an opportunity to get a window on the kinds of skills and attitudes that can help them succeed."

Mr. Conway is a lawyer with [Zimmer Kunz](#), based Downtown. He said he took part in the program this year because, "it was something I could do and is valuable to a lot of kids who could really benefit by having a helping hand in their future."

He was trained last summer by program coordinators and said written materials were provided to describe the program. The formal training session lasted three hours, he said, and included role playing and discussing issues that were likely to come up during the mentoring process and how to deal with them.

Throughout the academic year, Mr. Conway mentored a student for one hour every other week.

"I got to know the kids, helped with their resumes, worked on articulating goals, and at the end of the year they've had to write a report on their career plan," Mr. Conway said.

"These are not problem kids," he said. "They are motivated, and this could really help them."

Margaret Seifert, assistant principal at Langley High School, has worked closely with the CLAAY program and noticed an immediate benefit for the 15 to 20 students involved at Langley's Sheraden campus.

"I saw a change in students," she said. "I saw a lot of growth in the way they carried themselves."

She said the program gave the students an opportunity to focus on themselves and to have greater insight into their futures. And even while it has an individual focus and one-on-one mentoring relationships, CLAAY bridges relationships between students.

"This kind of program brings kids together," she said. "Even though it's one-on-one, it's a positive experience that they all share and can talk about together."

Margaret Starkes-Ross, an assistant principal at Allderdice's Squirrel Hill campus, echoed Ms. Seifert's sentiments about the student connection in her school as a result of the CLAAY program.

"It's sort of a family effect," Ms. Starkes-Ross said. "The students can relate better with each other because they have this common ground. Seniors become friends with freshmen through this experience."

With about 20 students enrolled at Allderdice, she said CLAAY has fulfilled its mission there because it's helped the students achieve more, add focus to their studies and directed their career choices.

"It's also helped them develop positive relationships with their mentors and the business community."

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