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Caverna High School, WKU unveil work, credit program

By JACKSON FRENCH jfrench@bgdailynews.com Oct 28, 2017

Caverna Independent Schools and Western Kentucky University are collaborating to start a program at Caverna High School that would allow students to fill local jobs and provide them with dual-credit courses.

The program is called Transforming Outcomes through Performance and Scholarship, or TOPS, according to Caverna Principal Chase Goff, who noted that the program works like the WKU Learn and Earn program. Upon completion of introductory training, Learn and Earn sets students up with part-time employment opportunities with local businesses.

Each semester, if the partnership between student and business is successful, the business then gives the student a tuition scholarship on a semester-by-semester basis, according to Learn and Earn's website.

“The concept is the same,” Goff said. “It’s modeled after (Learn and Earn) and they partner with us.”

TOPS will start with soft skills training for juniors at the school, Goff said, defining soft skills as ideas that “you don’t teach so much as develop,” including critical thinking, communication and how to collaborate with others.

Students do not need to have taken any career readiness courses to participate in TOPS, Goff said. He said the soft skills portion is partly meant to be a test of students’ commitment and ability to function in a working environment.

“We want to make sure the students are able to handle it and we want to make sure they really want to do it,” he said.

A small number of students, upon completing the soft skills training, will be set up with employment at participating companies during the summer of 2018, Goff said.

The companies will make a \$750 payment each semester to WKU’s College Heights Foundation that will be used to cover the cost of the dual-credit courses, according to Leslie Witty, project manager of the Learn and Earn program. The payments will count as tax-deductible donations, she said.

Dual-credit courses offered at the high school cost \$159 each and most earn the students three hours of college credit upon completion, Goff said.

Students participating in TOPS are required to take 12 hours of dual-credit courses for each semester they participate in the program, he said, adding that he hopes the program will open dual-credit opportunities to students who might not otherwise have the money to take the classes.

The Caverna students will also earn at least minimum wage while working for local businesses, Goff said.

Witty said she partnered with Caverna last school year to start a pilot program that worked with seniors and got them employed at local businesses during the summer, following their graduation.

After the program concluded, Goff approached her and asked if it would be possible to set up a similar program where students could earn dual credit while still in high school, Witty said.



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“He wants to see students who might not be able to afford dual-credit classes be able to get them,” she said.

Witty wants to keep the pool of students involved in TOPS small, at least for now, although the exact number could depend on how many companies are willing to accept part-time high school student workers, she said.

“We’re looking to start small and see how it works,” she said.

While there are benefits for the students, businesses stand to gain from the program as well, Witty said, because it provides them with a way to fill job openings and practically guarantees the student worker would be committed.

“This is helping businesses have a great employee who is committed, who is motivated,” she said.

Though the program was unveiled at a presentation Wednesday that some area business owners attended, so far, no companies have committed to the program, Goff said, adding that the school was open to partnering with just about any local business interested in participating.

“We’re really open to any that are willing to partner and employ our students,” he said.

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