

Bridge Foundation hands out \$200,000 in scholarships to Delco kids

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RIDLEY PARK — Representatives of Bridge Educational Foundation gathered with elected officials, business leaders, educators and students Thursday afternoon to announce more than \$200,000 in scholarships available to Delaware County children.

The scholarships are part of Pennsylvania's Educational Improvement Tax Credit program, which allows businesses to make tax-deductible donations to organizations, like Bridge Foundation, which then dispense them to qualifying students. The announcement was made in the gymnasium of St. James Regional Catholic School in Ridley Park, which has benefited from the EITC program. According to Principal Pat Kaesar, 32 families have received EITC scholarships to attend St. James.

"Without this money, there are many families that would not be able to be a part of Catholic education," said Kaesar, an educator for 26 years. "It's important that we can provide solid educational choices to parents." The school, formed by the merger of several parish schools last summer, currently has 400 students enrolled.

The \$208,000 in EITC scholarship funds are available to students who wish to attend 14 private schools in Delaware County. The funds were donated by a number of companies in the state that are part of the EITC program. In exchange for the donations to a qualified organization, companies receive credits applicable to a number of corporate taxes administered by the state.

"This program has been an unbelievable tool that's helped so many families," said Joseph Gerdes, a founder of Bridge Educational Foundation. According to the foundation's scholarship director, Kelly Gerdes, the organization has disbursed funds to more than 10,000 families in 59 counties, totalling more than \$17 million since 2005.

Joseph Gerdes, himself a product of parochial schools, said his parents made tremendous personal and financial sacrifices to ensure he had a quality education, and Bridge's goal is to ease that burden for other families.

The EITC program depends upon Pennsylvania's businesses as well as the schools to succeed.

"Literally, this program could not work without each of the groups, corporations, schools and legislators, working together," said state Sen. Dominic Pileggi, R-9, of Chester. "If just one part of that team breaks down, this program does not work."

Pileggi asked that everyone in attendance spread the word about the positive effects of the EITC program to other parents to let them know they have a choice, and also urged them to contact their state legislators to keep the program funded.

"The fact is that every year ... the EITC supporters in Harrisburg engage in a little arm wrestling match trying to maintain or advance the program," Pileggi said.

The program has enjoyed bipartisan support throughout the years, as evidenced by both Pileggi and fellow state Sen. Anthony H. Williams, D-8, of Philadelphia, being present Thursday.

"Greater than political affiliation is where you come from," Williams said. "We both represent Delaware County."

Williams has been an active supporter of school choice and trumpeted the successes of private school alternatives where "character" is a part of the curriculum.

"If it hadn't been for a school that provided a moral compass and demanded academic excellence, I would not be standing here today,"

he told the students of St. James.

The schools eligible to receive scholarship funds from Bridge Educational Foundation in Delaware County are Archbishop Carroll, Bonner-Prendie and Cardinal O'Hara high schools, Blessed Virgin Mary School, Drexel Neumann Academy, Mother of Providence Regional Catholic School, St. Andrew School, St. Cyril of Alexandria School, St. Francis of Assisi School, St. Pius X School, Valley Forge Military Academy and Widener University Child Development Center. St. James Regional Catholic School was also included in the list, along with the St. James High School Alumni Association which will be able to offer 31 scholarships with the additional funding from the EITC this year.

Businesses that donated to Bridge Educational Foundation this year via the EITC program include CSX Transportation, Chesapeake Energy, Enterprise Holdings, Malady and Wooten, Penn Terminals, UnitedHealthcare Community Plan and Waste Management.