

Bridge Foundation Provides Support to Private Schools

—By Rick Hiduk—

Representatives from the Bridge Education Foundation and its EITC (Educational Improvement Tax Credit) Program made two stops in the area on May 10, during which they committed \$116,500 to schools in five northeast Pennsylvania counties.

In an assembly held at St. Agnes School in Towanda, Joseph Gerdes explained that the EITC Program was devised by state lawmakers as a way for corporations to earmark up to 90 percent in tax credits to private schools in their own communities, rather than contribute the full amount to the Commonwealth's general education tax fund.

Once distributed to the local school, the money is used as scholarships and to supplement the cost of tuition for families with low to moderate incomes. Regionally, the funds were distributed among faith-based schools.

Gerdes explained that, as a student at a private school in Camp Hill, he was not aware of how much his parents had sacrificed for his education. He expressed hope that the assistance provided by EITC scholarships would leave local families with more money for food and clothing for their children.



Photos by Rick Hiduk
St. Agnes School Principal Kathy DeWan welcomed Bridge Foundation representatives and officials from other faith-based schools to a scholarship assembly held on May 10.

The program is approximately 12 years old and was proposed by legislators who believe, as Gerdes does, "that parents should have the option to find the best educational opportunities for their children."

The state reconfirmed its commitment to the program last year, Gerdes added, by putting an additional \$25 million into its coffers.

Rep. Tina Pickett, who attended the event, was one of

the elected officials who supported the initial legislation.

"Pennsylvania has created a very successful partnership between businesses and education," she remarked, adding that the EITC Program provides an opportunity for participating businesses to see exactly where their tax dollars are going.

"It is an investment in education that pays dividends far into the future," said St. Agnes principal Kathy DeWan, who introduced most of the corporate sponsors, school representatives, and other EITC supporters who sat on the St. Agnes auditorium stage in front of an audience largely comprised of St. Agnes students.

In addition to St. Agnes School in Towanda, Faith Mountain Christian Academy in New Milford, Epiphany Elementary School in Sayre, and North Rome Christian School in Rome received a portion of \$80,500 donated by Associated Wholesalers, Inc.; Chesapeake Energy; Waste Management; and Williams-Transco Pipeline.

In an afternoon assembly held at Wyoming Area Catholic School in Exeter, it was announced that the Endless Mountain Christian Academy in Tunkhannock would receive

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St. Agnes School sixth-graders (from left) Connor Hart, Dylan Hartmann, Evan Gisler, Abigail Segar, Hannah Tavani, Meghan Mendler, and Pilar Pastusic got a sneak peak at a treat brought for students by Bridge Foundation sponsors Associated Wholesalers,

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a portion of a \$36,000 donated made by AT&T, Chesapeake Energy, Waste Management, and Williams-Transco Pipeline.

Barb Sexton of Chesapeake Energy said that, as a major employer in the region, “We need an educated workforce, so it is important for us to provide these kinds of programs.”

John Hambrose of Waste Management noted that the philosophies behind the EITC Program are in line with his corporation's goals to promote things that improve the environment and things that improve education.

Sr. Kathleen Kelly of

Epiphany School extended gratitude to the contributing companies on behalf of the parents and the students, adding that the scholarships provided an opportunity for the students to learn the value of giving.

Jason Morrison, Diocesan Secretary for Development from Scranton, noted that EITC contributions have allowed his office to distribute 76 awards among its schools, in addition to 86 scholarships.

Faith Mountain Christian Academy was represented by Pete Kelly, Peggy Walker, and Wendy Dudley, and North Rome

Christian School was represented by administrator Lee Ann Carmichael. Sen. Gene Yaw's office was represented by Eric Houser.

The Saint Agnes students delighted adult participants of the program with a number of uplifting prayerful songs in between individual speeches.

While the youngest among them may not have fully understood the magnitude of the event, they did reap one benefit from participating sponsors. A large cake made by Rob's Market, an AWI member, was served to students there after lunch.



Photo by Rick Hiduk

Bridge Education Foundation representative Joe Gerdes (standing) explained to St. Agnes students how lawmakers and corporations use the EITC Program to earmark tax dollars to faith-based schools. He was flanked by (from left) St. Agnes Principal Kathey DeWan, John Hambrose of Waste Management, Eric Houser from Sen. Gene Yaw's office, Jason Morrison of the Scranton Catholic Diocese, Sr. Kathleen Kelly of Epiphany School, Barb Sexton of Chesapeake Energy, Chris Staffel of Williams-Transco Pipeline, and Rep. Tina Pickett.