



Low-income students in McKeesport to receive Bridge Foundation scholarships

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By Deana Carpenter

Nearly 20 students attending Serra Catholic High School in McKeesport will receive a total of \$28,000 in Opportunity Scholarships from the Bridge Educational Foundation to help pay for their tuition at the private institution.

At a presentation May 21, representatives from the Bridge Foundation and U.S. Steel as well as elected officials presented a \$60,000 check that enables some low-income families from Serra and other schools to send their children to private schools. The money was donated as part of Pennsylvania's Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit Program.

The Opportunity Scholarship Tax Program was created in 2012 so that students living in low-achieving school districts could apply for a scholarship to attend a private school or a different public one. The Bridge Educational Foundation of Harrisburg was established under the Opportunity Scholarship Tax Program to partner families and schools with businesses in the state in an effort to provide scholarships.

"This program has the ability to change lives," said Tristan Samples, a Serra Catholic sophomore who received an opportunity scholarship to attend the school.

The tuition at Serra Catholic is \$8,400 per year for a Catholic student and \$8,900 for a non-Catholic student.

The remaining \$32,000 in scholarships will be shared among the following high schools: East Catholic in Forest Hills, \$12,000; Mon Yough Catholic School in White Oak, \$3,500; St. Agnes School in West Mifflin, \$12,000; St. Therese in Munhall, \$4,000. The schools will divide the money as they see fit among families with the greatest needs.

According to the State Department of Education, a low-achieving school is defined as a public elementary or secondary school that ranked in the lowest 15 percent of schools based on combined math and reading schools from annual tests like the PSSA or Keystone Exams.

“Many parents struggle to make the choice to send their students to a tuition-based school,” said Jennifer Kessler, Bridge Foundation board member. She said the scholarships can help families who choose to send their children to private schools.

“Your families have worked extremely hard to send you to this school,” Ms. Kessler said to a group of Serra sophomores and juniors at the presentation. “I hope you take advantage of every minute you’re here.”

Of the benefactors, Ms. Kessler said, “The money comes from corporations that truly believe in this program.”

Chris Masciantonio, general manager of governmental affairs for U.S. Steel, said the scholarship program “plays a small but important role in helping educate students in the Mon Valley.”

Mr. Masciantonio said U.S. Steel employs about 3,000 people in the Mon Valley.

State Senator Jay Costa was also on hand.

“I think it’s important for students to see what takes place in government and how it reaches their districts,” Mr. Costa said. “I hope you appreciate the value and importance of you education here at Serra.”

“We hope some day you’ll realize how blessed you are and pay it forward and be on the other side of the podium,” Ms. Kessler said.

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