

P

ast the first-floor metal detectors, past the seemingly endless rows of lockers, past the patrolling security guards, in a small, windowless room on the basement floor of Pittsburgh's Langley High School, a pizza party is in full swing.

A couple dozen students and adults are scattered around several tables, desks and folding chairs, talking a little sports, a little music, a little TV, a little hair style, a little gastronomy.

"Who ate the last piece of cheese?" asks one participant.

"You're too late," says another. "Try the pepperoni."

Welcome to Career Prep — the 2006 version. The pizza party — some might just call it lunch — is a regular feature of the every-other-Friday sessions organized by the Career Literacy for African American Youth program, or CLAAY. It's part of the Institute for Economic Transformation at Duquesne University.

In keeping with CLAAY programs at more than a dozen other high schools throughout the Pittsburgh region, this group of students has spent the previous hour exploring what they're going to do after high school. They follow a step-by-step guide developed by CLAAY mentors to help them identify interesting jobs and then craft a plan to land them.

The mentors are not full-time teachers. They're professionals, businesspeople and college students from the area who have signed up as advisors and tutors to help turn CLAAY students' interests into solid career plans.

While these students come from varied circumstances, they do share the label of being "the quiet ones," those who teachers tend to

Pizza is good bonding food, and ninth-graders Shamira Williams, left, and Raven Huntley, right, enjoy their slices at Pittsburgh's Langley High School with Fawn Robinson of the Duquesne University School of Nursing. Robinson is a mentor in the CLAAY — Career Literacy for African American Youth — program.



A photograph of two young women sitting at a wooden table in a brightly lit room, likely a school cafeteria. They are both smiling and eating pizza. The woman on the left is wearing a pink polo shirt and glasses. The woman on the right is wearing a light-colored jacket over a white t-shirt with a graphic design. On the table in front of them are two Pizza Hut cups, one with a Pepsi logo, and plates of pizza. The background shows a bulletin board with various papers pinned to it.

PIZZA WITH EXTRA CHEESE, OLIVES, SAUSAGE, ONIONS, PEPPERONI (AND A CAREER)

SEVERAL PITTSBURGH PROGRAMS ARE USING APPEALING ACTIVITIES AND MENTORING OPPORTUNITIES TO WHET HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' APPETITES FOR JOBS IN THE 21ST CENTURY. BY THOMAS BUELL, JR. PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSHUA FRANZOS

overlook because — for better or worse — they don't draw much attention to themselves. For many of them, the CLAAY sessions represent the first time the spotlight has been placed on them in terms of considering what kind of career they might like to pursue.

"I knew I wanted to get out of high school, but I never thought much about after that," says sophomore Jordan Palm as he drinks the last of his soda from a plastic cup. "[CLAAY] has helped me learn stuff I'd never really looked at before — jobs, careers, setting goals."

Palm wants to be a motorcycle mechanic, or a heating and cooling technician, and eventually run his own business. He now knows that, to achieve his goal, he must do well in high school and then attend a two-year vocational program. It's a hard-nosed plan and a sharp reality check for a 16-year-old.

Ensuring that these often-forgotten students are not lost in the system — that they identify a life's work passion and get the training to pursue it — is the mission of CLAAY and several other career preparation programs in the Pittsburgh area funded by the region's philanthropic community, including The Heinz Endowments and the Buhl, Richard King Mellon, Claude Worthington Benedum, Pittsburgh, Grable, Alcoa and Annenberg foundations.

The Endowments provides an average of more than \$760,000 annually to career-literacy programs, which have evolved through the past five years to focus not only on helping students identify careers, but also on gaining the skills and flexible attitude necessary to succeed in the 21st-century workforce. The programs the foundation supports include three — CLAAY; The Future is Mine, which organizes career awareness events; and Keys2Work, which has an online component — that together have received a total of more than \$2.6 million in Endowments grants.

"We want [students] to be lifelong learners who can adapt to changes that are thrown at them," says Suzanne Walsh, the program officer for Innovation Economy at The Heinz Endowments. "Reports show that in the new workforce, a person might have several jobs throughout their working years. We want to prepare kids for that constantly changing environment."

School administrators already see positive results from the CLAAY program, which has received \$920,000 in Endowments support.

"This is one of the programs where students ask if it's coming back next year," says Langley Principal Linda Baehr. "That's a very good thing. It's a very thoughtful program and a very effective program. Anything that gets the students thinking about the future is a good thing."

The new emphasis on training students to take control of their futures after high school also extends to suburbia. At Steel Valley High School in Munhall, the fact that a Career Day event is in progress is given away by the Allegheny County Medical Examiner's van parked in front.

"Everybody wants to go into forensics now," says Bob Huston, manager of the county's crime lab. "They see it on TV and they think that's the job for them."

Huston is one of several dozen government, nonprofit and for-profit representatives setting up tables at the event, which differs from most career fairs because it's organized entirely by students.

Through The Future is Mine, which grew out of the Mon Valley Education Consortium, the students decide on invitees and presenters, set up the schedule and run the event. The Future is Mine also provides a two-day Career Development Academy, a peer-to-younger-peer project and other school-to-employment awareness programs for students and teachers at the 25 school districts it serves in the region.

"I had no idea what I wanted to do before this," says Lori Wunderlich, a Steel Valley senior in her second year of helping to set up the career fair. "Most kids my age didn't. Then I heard about The Future is Mine and met other kids who were getting a head start on their careers, and I said, 'I have to get into this program.'"

Wunderlich, who wants to be a teacher, already is taking classes at Community College of Allegheny County and Chatham College. When she graduates from Steel Valley, she'll have 16 credits toward a five-year program at Chatham that will gain her a master's degree and a teaching certificate.

"I never would have done that without The Future is Mine," she says. "It has been a huge benefit."

The stories of Lori Wunderlich and Jordan Palm embody the broad spectrum of career directions undertaken by today's teenagers, and the new approach to preparing kids for success in the modern job market.

Career counseling for high schoolers isn't new, but it has



CLAAY

come a long way since the days when the career track automatically meant four-year college, and the trade school kids were considered second-class citizens.

“The rules that used to apply to having a successful career don’t apply anymore,” says Vanessa Lund, program director for the Human Capital Policy Initiative, a special project of the University of Pittsburgh’s Institute of Politics. The initiative was developed in cooperation with the Endowments and Workforce Connections, which is supported by the Pennsylvania Economy League, a nonprofit research group.

“The idea that going to a four-year college is your ticket to success is absolutely wrong. It’s great for some people, but not for everyone,” says Lund. “Students and parents need to think of college as one of many viable options for achieving their career goals.”

The Human Capital Policy Initiative works with CLAAY, The Future is Mine and other programs to educate students, teachers, school administrators, politicians and community leaders about trends in the workforce and how young people can best prepare themselves for those jobs of tomorrow.

“The goal is to help kids see how something they’re learning in the classroom will help them in real life,” Lund says.

Jeremiah Jackson, a CLAAY coordinator, lends his expertise to Antonio Retana, right foreground, as the Langley High School senior ponders an online college application. Duquesne University’s Institute for Economic Transformation began the CLAAY program after the institute’s research showed that many high school students in southwestern Pennsylvania were not prepared to meet the region’s employment demands. CLAAY addresses this problem by providing students with mentors, tutors and enrichment experiences.

“The vocational schools have become very sophisticated in what they’re offering.”

To make her point, Lund cites statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor predicting that only a quarter of American jobs in 2014 will require a college degree or higher. Twenty-eight percent will require a two-year degree of some kind, and 46 percent will require on-the-job training.

Even so, surveys by the Pennsylvania Department of Education indicate that 56 percent of the state’s high school students still say they plan to attend a four-year college, although half of them won’t graduate, Lund says.

“What we’re trying to do is get people to start thinking earlier about their careers, and to connect their education and training to what it is they want to do.”

Lund believes the concept of blue-collar and white-collar jobs is seriously outdated. She promotes the notion of a “gold-collar” workforce in which employees possess basic technology skills that can be adapted to a wide range of jobs, proficiency in reading and math, and strong critical thinking and problem-solving abilities.

“Those types of workers will be in demand; they’ll be well-paid and they’ll require as little as a two-year degree,” she says.

“But most people don’t have any awareness of those kinds of jobs. That’s what we’re trying to change.”

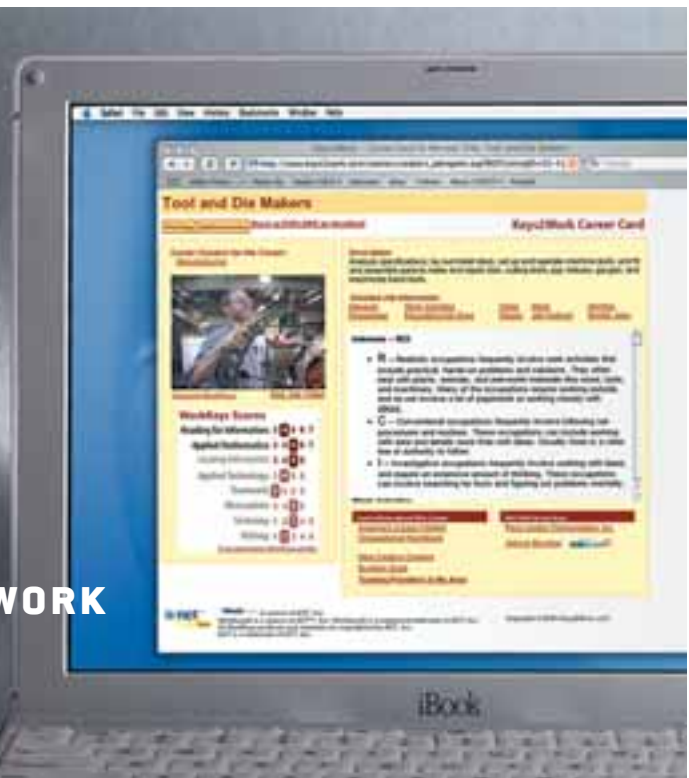
Keys2Work is one of the more popular programs used to help students narrow their career interests and sharpen their skills. It was developed in Pittsburgh and made available to dozens of high schools throughout southwestern Pennsylvania — including Langley and Steel Valley — with the help of a \$250,000 Endowments grant in 2003. The foundation has since awarded the program another \$960,000 in funding.

The program uses a four-step process to measure a student’s skill levels, particularly in the areas of reading for information and applied math. Then it helps students explore job openings and education and training options available to a person with those skills.

If students in the program want to improve academic skills to qualify for a better career or a better education, Keys2Work provides an online remediation curriculum to fill the gaps. Once they’ve beefed up their skills, usually when they’re in the 10th grade, students can complete the process by taking the standardized ACT WorkKeys test. The WorkKeys results then can be used to create a proficiency certificate to be included in a student’s portfolio, or to bolster applications for employment or post-secondary training.

Students in the Keys2Work program can access nearly 1,000 interactive career cards on the Internet, like this one about tool and die making. Developed in Pittsburgh, Keys2Work takes advantage of Internet technology to help students improve their academic skills and earn a proficiency certificate they can use when seeking a job or post-secondary education. When exploring employment options, students can pull up the career cards and learn about tasks, skills, training locations and other facets of a wide range of jobs.

KEYS2WORK





Duquesne High School sophomore Robert Jackson guides fifth-grader Alissa Lohr, center, as she assembles a puzzle while blindfolded. Also wearing a blindfold is sixth-grader Adrianna Furby, right, who reaches in the wrong direction to arrange puzzle pieces. The teamwork-building exercise at Duquesne Middle School is part of the Peer to Younger Peer Project of The Future is Mine program, which is designed to show students how to make smart decisions about their futures. Program activities include career exploration opportunities, peer projects and the chance to plan a portion of the annual The Future is Mine Conference.

“We show them that the more skills they have, the better job they can get, the more choices they have and the more money they can earn,” says David Mosey, executive director of Smart Futures, the nonprofit umbrella company that develops and monitors Keys2Work. “People love that part of it. This is the overlap between education and career development.”

Smart Futures also is rolling out programs to provide mentoring assistance for students via e-mail, which will allow greater participation by mentors who may not have time for face-to-face work with students, and another online program called My Career Insight to get middle-schoolers thinking about careers.

“The PA e-Mentor program and My Career Insight are tools the students will be able to use whenever they want,” Mosey says. “Communicating by e-mail and getting information online are where they’re comfortable.”

All of these programs buttress efforts by Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell to prepare employees to compete in the global economy, increase options for students to receive post-secondary education and enhance the skills of high school graduates.

Approved last July, Job Ready Pennsylvania legislation allots an additional \$91 million in state funding to train future

employees for high-priority industries and occupations. It also better aligns education and training funding with employer needs.

Several area career literacy programs, including The Future is Mine, receive state grants in addition to support from the Endowments.

Aimee LeFevers, program director for The Future is Mine, credits the Endowments, which has given the program \$500,000 in grants, with providing more than just important funding. She says it brings together several programs that share the common goal of increasing career opportunities for high school students in the region.

“It’s a great network [Suzanne Walsh] has started,” says LeFevers. “If it weren’t for [the Endowments], we’d only be passing each other at meetings.”

Back at Langley High School, freshman Shamira Williams confesses that the pizza party was what originally drew her to the CLAAY program. Now, she’s glad her friend Deona Summers talked her into joining for other reasons.

“I like it because it helps me think about what I want to do later in my life, after I graduate,” she says. “And I like it because I get to express my feelings.” *h*