Martin County schools program allows area students to learn and earn

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For Progress & Innovation

A select number of high school students in Martin County schools are not only helping their schools each day but earning money as well.

The students, part of a Students Supporting Schools program, spent the past school year answering calls for help by teachers who had recalcitrant computers, skittish multimedia projectors and balky Smartboards.

Mark Malham, coordinator of career and technical education for the school district, said the idea for creating a program where selected students would be hired by the school district to perform Level 1 technical support began before the 2014-2015 school year. The program is only available in high schools and elementary schools since their school day schedules are more closely aligned.

“We have a technology genie that isn’t going back into the bottle,” Malham said. “We were envisioning engaging our kids who live and sleep technology 24/7 to have them provide Level 1 support and, in this way, the teachers can get help more quickly and our six techs who support 20 schools in the district can work on more technical problems.”

When support is needed, teachers fill out a work order. A student is sent to work on the problem. “If the student can’t fix it, they can articulate the problem, so the technician will know what to do,” Malham said.

There were several steps between the idea and the actual employment of the students, according the Malham. A job description was created. Malham and his coordinators distributed flyers and brochures and broadcast television announcements on the school TV news to spread the word.

The district took applications in the spring, with 30 students applying, and eventually narrowed down the list to 18 students after interviews. The students were evaluated on their technical ability, but also on their integrity, problem-solving ability, how they interacted with the staff, and their ability to manage their time.

Training occurred during the summer months. Once hired, student technicians are paid and also receive a grade based on a weekly evaluation that looks at their professionalism, dependability and technical ability.

The program rolled out in August 2014, and is scheduled to continue this school year. Students that left the program, primarily because of graduation, are being replaced with new candidates that were hired this spring and received training this summer.

“We want to engage the students, have the same hiring process that we would have for any employee, pay them and evaluate them in a similar way that the school district would evaluate employees. At their midterm and final exam, they had to do essay questions, and we couch it like a professional assessment that they would get at work. We know that many of these kids could solve higher level problems, but we limit them to Level 1 tech support, the basic issues that a help desk could help with. We have 2,000 teachers and support staff who can use their abilities,” Malham said.

In the first semester alone, the student technicians processed more than 800 work tickets that otherwise would have been assigned to desktop support technicians. “We are still running the numbers of the work tickets for the second semester, but I presume it will be at 800 or higher,” he said.

In the first year, the program has been a success, Malham said.

“The school board, which had to approve the program and job description, is pleased with what we are doing. The students love the work. We even had one lady who graduated, who wanted to stay in high school just to stay in the program. The students realize what is needed on the job, which is great experience for them,” said Malham.

He added that the students’ parents are very supportive because their sons and daughters are getting employable skills and actual work experience. “The schools are so enthusiastic about the program. And we’re getting calls from other districts, who are considering implementing a similar program in their schools,” Malham said.