

Work-Based Program gives THS students a leg up

By Barry H. Hendrix

Thomasville High School has a Work-Based Learning (WBL) program that is the envy of other school systems in the state.

The program, which has been supervised by Rita Larrimore for 11 years, currently serves 99 students, the most participation ever. WBL (formerly known as cooperative education) allows students to work off-campus during the school day. Students are allowed to arrange their class load around their work hours.

Students in the program work in paid "apprenticeship" positions in local companies such as Walgreens, Big Mike's Steakhouse, Sonic, etc. and various agencies such as the Thomasville Public Library and city services throughout the City of Thomasville. There are also non-paid "internships" in the school system. The majority of the THS WBL students are in paid positions, she said.

Larrimore began with approximately 20 students 11 years ago. Since that time, the State Department of Education has relaxed barriers to allow students to be involved, she said, and local owners and managers have seen the value of students working in their agencies and companies.

The WBL program continues to look for other area businesses, which would like to offer positions, because there are even more THS students who would like to join the program. It is an easy way for local businesses to support Thomasville City Schools and help a student with employment.

Dr. Phillip Cleveland, deputy state superintendent with the state CTE (Career and Technical Education), and Mike Rutledge, coordi-

nator with the state WBL program, were both instrumental in expanding the possibilities for career tech students in Alabama, Larrimore said. "Dr. Cleveland and Mr. Rutledge have made a big difference in career tech," she said. The program has become more flexible for students to be involved and still fulfill their academic goals.

Students can work as little as eight hours-a-week to earn high school credit, she said, but many students work many more hours a week. Larrimore interviews the students before they are placed in the program and continually supervises their paperwork and progress on the job and in the classroom.

THS students are learning valuable workplace and life skills in the WBL positions. Many students have continued in their WBL careers after high school. According to the state Department of Education, during fiscal year 2015, there was an economic impact from THS WBL to the City of Thomasville totaling \$235,200. During fiscal year 2016, that impact had grown to \$1,345,786.47, and THS students earned a total of \$192,255.21.

"The Thomasville Work-Based Learning program is a vital link in developing 'On the Job' experience for our high school students," said Thomasville Mayor Sheldon Day. "Students are given a broad range of options from healthcare to diesel mechanics...Local businesses love the program because they look at each student as a potential recruit for their business after high school. It is a win-win for our schools, our students and our businesses."

"It's worked out really well for my office," said



PHOTO BY BARRY H. HENDRIX

The Thomasville High School Work-Based Learning program is run by teacher Rita Larrimore. Joining her are Alabama State Coordinator for the Work-Based Learning Program Mike Rutledge and Thomasville High School Assistant Principal Donna Calhoun.

Jason Jones, owner of West Alabama Insurance. "It gives (the students) a sense of responsibility. They are being held accountable. ... (They understand that) you need to be productive." The WBL program gives students experience in careers such as insurance that they might not have considered before, he said.

The WBL program fills in gaps for staffing, said Pam Taylor, Human Resources Director at

Thomasville Health Care and Rehabilitation Center (THCRC). The students work in important low-skill positions such as maintenance and providing activities. "The residents love seeing young people," she said.

Taylor has found there is no problem with tardiness with THS students. "We hold them to the same standards as our other employees. ... They know how to behave in the workplace,"

she said. The contribution of the WBL students is considered "a learning process" at THCRC.

The vision of Dr. Cleveland is for work-based coordinators to be "a public liaison in the community," Rutledge said during a recent visit to THS. "We want to show we're turning out students who are good workers." It is important for the schools to inform the public. Thomasville "has done a better job of telling

the story than most," he said.

Cleveland is currently seeking additional funding for teachers in the WBL program. Larrimore will share her experiences with the program with fellow teachers from across the state this month in Birmingham, Mobile and Montgomery and help fellow WBL teachers better promote the program to local businesses.

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Coastal Alabama Community College at Thomasville students, Hunter Spidel and Chip Williams, feel the campus' Career Technical Center is one of the best around and a prospective student can later get a job at one of the area's mills.

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