



APPLICATION FORM

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 3, 2019.** Please include this application form with electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: County of Henrico
Program Title: Setting the Bar High: CTE Letter-of-Intent Signing Day
Program Category: Customer Service

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Anthony McDowell
Title: Deputy County Manager for Public Safety
Signature: *Anthony E. McDowell*

Program Overview

Henrico County Public Schools' first Career and Technical Letter-of-Intent Signing Day in Henrico County, Virginia recognized and celebrated high school students who completed a career and technical education program and were offered positions in the workforce. The March 28, 2018 event emulated ceremonies that have become common for high school athletes signing letters-of-intent to play for NCAA programs. Students and representatives of their future employers signed symbolic letters of agreement, as families shared in their excitement and members of the media looked on.

As with signing days for star athletes, the event is a way to honor a student's accomplishments and decision to enter the world of work. The flash from cameras and the mounted video cameras of local news outlets added excitement. Local TV stations and newspapers conducted interviews with the students, parents and business representatives and national news outlets broadcast stories of the event.

Problem/Challenge/Situation Faced by Locality

Our workforce has been affected by the decline of the traditional building trades and the decades-long promotion of four-year colleges as the only option for high school students. Many industries are in need of qualified trained employees. The aging of the current workforce and the expansion of the economy are factors driving the current shortage. Businesses and apprenticeship organizations are in desperate need of high school graduates who possess skills offered in career and technical education programs.

High schools have often celebrated students entering college by having their names and colleges highlighted or allowing students to wear the attire of their future schools. We have also celebrated

the students entering the military through various ceremonies. If students were entering the workforce, their decisions would sometimes be minimized by other students remarking that their classmates were “just” going to work after graduation. It was seen as a “less than” choice. Henrico Schools Department of Career and Technical Education (CTE) wanted to find a way to celebrate the commitment students were making to enter a career, while at the same time adding value to the choice the students made. By promoting the students’ decisions through the Letter-of-Intent Signing Day, we hoped to change the perception of those entering the workforce.

How Program Fulfilled Awards Criteria

HCPS’ Career and Technical Letter-of-Intent Signing Day is a model of innovation and community collaboration, and is being replicated in school systems nationwide.

Henrico Schools Department of Career and Technical Education has held variety of programs and events to promote career and technical education and workforce development. This is the first event that has resonated on a national scale, and the results have been phenomenal. The event has helped change the way the community views the decisions of students entering the workforce in Henrico County. It is now less likely that students will say they are “just” going to work.

The event has helped increase pride in students’ choices, opened the door for businesses to form partnerships with school systems, and ensured that both schools and businesses will benefit from the partnership. Businesses are willing to invest in the students by creating a four-year plan that helps outline the value of their decision.

Henrico County Public Schools strives to make sure every student graduate from high school either enrolled, enlisted and/or employed. Before the signing day, we recognized students who were enlisting in the military or entering a two- or 4-year college. This recognition helped fuel the perception that students moving into the workforce or post-secondary training were not as successful. In reality, this perception is far from the truth. Many students entering the workforce from high school will be highly successful, and many will be more financially secure, much earlier in life than had they pursued a four-year college path. By recognizing the students entering the workforce or post-secondary training, we were able to add value to the career preparation training they have received in high school and validating and quantifying the value of the career training through Henrico Schools' career and technical education courses.

By "seeding" other similar events in school systems nationwide, this project has become a groundbreaking initiative with the potential to change the nature of students' career choices, and how those choices are perceived.

How Program Was Carried Out

The main objective of the CTE Letter-of-Intent Signing Day was to celebrate and recognize high school students graduating with a CTE concentration and entering the workforce, or some form of post-secondary training directly connected to developing the workforce, such as apprenticeship programs. Other objectives of the program included:

- Highlighting the many lucrative opportunities available to students, enabling parents to understand the value of the alternatives to a four-year college.
- Encouraging businesses to engage with students before graduation to help fill their workforce needs.

- Encouraging students to continue to strive for excellence as their high school careers end and their careers begin.

We began planning the event in October 2017. The idea was first discussed publicly in the November meeting with ChamberRVA (the regional chamber of commerce group of businesses dedicated to providing a strong business voice and developing leaders and entrepreneurs). The group was receptive but unclear of the purpose and wanted to understand possible obstacles to participation. Over the next month, a template for the letter-of-intent document, promotional materials, and a simple one-page explanation document were developed. These materials enabled us to begin recruiting business partners. In order to help businesses understand the value of the event, the director of career and technical education met with businesses considering participating. Business leaders began to understand that the letter-of-intent was not a contract, but a way to identify a student who might meet their hiring needs, while providing a four-year career pathway plan for the students and parents similar to college.

Once business partners were identified, opportunities were planned for students and potential employers to connect and build relationships. Some businesses offered short internships, some offered field trips, and some came in to meet with students to talk about their business and industry. The goal was to give students the chance to identify with not only the career pathway, but a company, and to form an early relationship. As educators, this gave our teachers another way to encourage students to stay engaged with their course work. One student interviewed at the CTE signing day event said, "I was hanging around with some knuckleheads, but when I started talking to my potential employer I realized I needed to step it up and leave them behind."

After businesses began to build relationships with future employees, jobs were “posted” with our career and technical education program and students applied for positions that interested them. All CTE programs aim to develop the soft skills needed in the workforce. We continually work with our students to develop their resumes and improve their interviewing skills through mock interviews. We also incorporate “dress for success” days into the school year, and provide students with leadership opportunities. Many employers were so impressed with the students when they interviewed, they decided to hire more Henrico Schools student than they had planned.

As we worked to continue promoting the value of CTE courses and the opportunities available to students entering the workforce, we asked employers to list their employment benefits on the letter-of-intent that would be used at the signing day. We also wanted to project a four-year career plan for the students after high school. Working with the employers, we were able to show possible career progression over four-years and identify training and educational opportunities provided by the employer. This not only help the students and parents understand the value of the career opportunity, it allowed us to help quantify this value. For example, a typical student’s debt after college is around \$200,000. On the other hand, in one hypothetical career path, business “A” commits to paying the student \$45,000 the first year, with a \$2,500 step increase each year, plus benefits such as insurance, retirement and vacation. The employer also commits to paying \$10,000 in education and training costs each year for four years. So, what is the entirety of this package? A total of \$235,000 (\$195,000 salary and \$40,000 in education), plus benefits. So instead of being \$200,000 in debt – and sometimes struggling to find a job – the value of the student’s choice would be \$435,000. This was a powerful example for parents and students to consider in thinking about career paths.

The actual signing day event was held much like a ceremony for a high school athlete signing with an NCAA program. A business's representatives sat with the student at a table before an audience of families, classmates, businesses, reporters and school staff members. The business representative had the opportunity to speak about the value to their company of participating in the event. A moderator highlighted the four-year plan and the "perceived monetary value" of the offer as the student and the business representative signed the letter-of-intent. The employer then presented the student with an article of clothing, such as a hat or shirt with the company logo, shook hands, and posed for photos. As they exited the area to move to an interview area, the next business representative and student moved to the table. Fittingly, the event was held at the Junior Achievement Finance Park facility, which is dedicated to help students understand and develop career pathways while learning about finances.

Financing and Staffing

The Career and Technical Letter-of-Intent Signing Day was designed to add value to our students' decision to enter the workforce with a skill directly after high school. Choosing the workforce option does not prevent students from going to college, but can provide a funding source for students because employers may pay for continuing education.

Neither the Department of Career and Technical Education nor Henrico County Public Schools incurred monetary costs for the event. The event space was donated by Henrico County Public Library's Libbie Mill Library branch, and the Junior Achievement Finance Park. Businesses provided the articles of clothing with their logos to celebrate the students' choices.

Program Results

The results of the program have exceeded all expectations. Our goal was to bring attention to students entering the workforce, to help them and their parents understand the value of this

option. We did not anticipate how the program would resonate with people across the U.S. and in Canada. The Career and Technical Letter-of-Intent Signing Day is now being replicated far and wide and has sparked a movement to celebrate students entering the workforce. After a year, the department still receives regular phone calls from schools, elected officials, industry groups and businesses asking for information on how to plan a similar event.

Locally, the response from businesses wanting to participate and employ students has been overwhelming. Each year we have a back-to-school dinner where we thank our business partners for working with us. While in the past, we have had 20-30 businesses participate, this year we had more than 175 responses within 24 hours of sending the invitation. We have seen a large jump in businesses wanting to participate in the next CTE Letter-of-Intent Signing Day.

Mike Rowe, former host of the Discovery Channel's "Dirty Jobs" and voice of the long-running show "Deadliest Catch," responded to one of our Facebook posts with his support, and his comments went viral. Rowe reposted Henrico Schools' photos and descriptions of the event, adding, "This is the way forward. No attempt to close the skills gap will ever succeed until or unless we celebrate those who are willing to learn a skill that's in demand. This is not just a terrific idea, it's a model for every other technical school in the country ... Here's hoping others will follow Henrico's lead." The Facebook post quickly led to the director of the school division's Career and Technical Education program receiving an invitation to be interviewed nationally for the Today Show and Fox News.

At the second annual signing day, held in April 2019, 110 students participated, and the event proved so popular that it lasted much of the day. Representatives from other school divisions traveled from as far away as Minnesota to observe the event.

Brief Summary

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