**McKeesport Area School District program starts teaching value of school attendance early**

*Jennifer R. Vertullo | Trib Total Media*

First-graders Carl Jackson and Alexis Dixon accept stickers and pencils from United Way's Be There project consultant Shauna McMillan, White Oak Magisterial District Judge Tom Miller and AIU McKeesport Family Center staff member Yvonne Bray.

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By Jennifer R. Vertullo

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McKeesport Area students were greeted with smiles, stickers and school supplies when they stepped off their buses on Wednesday morning.

Welcoming committees of teachers, administrators and community volunteers met with students in kindergarten through sixth grade at Twin Rivers Primary/Intermediate, Francis McClure Primary/Intermediate and the Founders' Hall Annex to kick off the district's Be There program in partnership with the United Way of Allegheny County.

Studies indicate that kids who attend school regularly are more likely to succeed. The Be There program engages students, teachers and parents in discussing the importance of attendance.

“If students aren't in school they can't learn. It's time off task,” attendance officer Laureese Harper said. “It's important for them to learn that structure now so they know how they will be expected to carry themselves going on to college and in the workforce.”

Superintendent Rula Skezas said it's important that students understand the school is happy to have them there.

“We're happy they're here, and we hope they're ready to learn,” Skezas said.

Shauna McMillan, Be There project consultant for the United Way, said students always are stunned by the support they receive during a project kickoff.

“It's great to see how they react,” she said. “They're asking why we're here, saying they love having us here and asking if we'll be back tomorrow. It's all about having a welcoming atmosphere for the students.”

Twin Rivers Intermediate principal Paul Sweda thanked the United Way for bringing a successful program to McKeesport Area schools.

“Their support and enthusiasm clearly shines onto the students as they enter our buildings,” Sweda said.

Having familiar faces greeting students as they get off the bus is the first step in demonstrating that the whole community is invested in education, Harper said.

“When kids see people from the community who they connect with, it's reinforcing a message they may not want to hear from their parents,” Harper said. “They'll have it in the back of their minds that they'd better get to school because they don't want to let those community members down.”

Twin Rivers Primary principal Tia Wanzo said having community members at the school was a nice addition to the school day.

“The kids were truly excited this morning,” she said. “This is a great way to encourage students to come to school.”

The primary and intermediate schools will continue the Be There momentum with incentives for attendance, Wanzo said. Students will work to earn pizza parties, ice cream socials, movie days and other fun activities.

McKeesport Area students and staff will take part in Be There activities throughout the school year. During the second nine-week grading period, the program will be introduced to students in seventh through 12th grades.

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