

MT. VERNON Sentinel

WEDNESDAY, MAY 13, 2009

AN EDITION OF

MVTHS students join LEAD SI

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MT. VERNON — Five Mt. Vernon Township High School students will be the first in Jefferson County to join the LEAD SI class of 2009.

The developmental program, which promotes young people to develop a deeper appreciation of Southern Illinois, is a partner program of the Connect SI initiative. According to the Connect SI Web site, the program is regionally based and strives to be "built upon

broadband connectivity, with the concept that our dispersed assets can be connected to make our region a driving force in the world economy. The goal of the project is to produce measurable, transformative, and sustainable results that will allow Southern Illinois to thrive rather than simply survive."

Connect SI Executive Director Kathy Lively explained, "Our goal was to expand within the 20-county region that we cover, and by Jefferson County students joining LEAD

SI, we're closer to achieving our goal."

Last year, the first LEAD SI program consisted of 30 student leaders from the Union County and John A. Logan Community College region. This year, seven additional counties have joined in the expansion of the program.

According to Lively, the students attend a three-day Institute and continue to participate in activi-

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ties associated with the program throughout the year. The students selected, who are entering their junior and senior years of high school, will partake in events that build leadership skills and develop social networking and appreciation for the region.

According to Jefferson County Development Corporation Executive Director Mary Ellen Bechtel, who attended the Connect SI presentation in March at John A. Logan College in Carterville, the program is important for area students.

"It is a program that will engage and focus youth to help them appreciate Southern Illinois. It teaches them leadership and gives them access to current leaders in the area," she explained.

SELECTING STUDENTS

Sophomores Alexandra Frisby and Hannah Weber, and juniors Blake Fields, Taylor Morgan and Tyler Weston were chosen from MVTHS to participate in the program.



Hannah Weber



Taylor Morgan



Alexandra Frisby



Blake Fields



Tyler Weston

Bechtel said, "This is a great opportunity for these students. I think it's very important area students are a part of this."

The students, who were able to nominate themselves, submitted an essay and a letter of recommendation from an adult to complete the application for the program.

"Last year we asked for the students with the top GPA, but this year we focused on choosing students with both leadership qualities and a high GPA," Lively explained.

A selection committee chose the top students after the application deadline on April 1. According to Lively, the expansion of the program is contributed to largely by an advocate in each school.

"Rob Knutson, the supporter from Mt. Vernon Township High School, is the

Champion for the Jefferson County students. When we have a Champion, we just have great success," she stated.

According to Knutson, the AVC/CTE director at MVTHS, both he and Melanie Gulley, director of student services, worked to select the applications from students that were then passed on to Connect SI.

"We had about a dozen students apply. The five that were selected are a part of the group of 30 to 40 in the entire program," he said.

To Knutson, the concept of LEAD SI promotes the growth of industry in the area.

He said, "There has been a growing concern after it was noticed that a number of youth are leaving the community because they weren't aware of the advantages of staying in our region. This

program will allow them to learn more about the opportunities here in Southern Illinois."

Not only are surrounding counties targeted to benefit

from the program, but the students are expected to profit from the opportunity.

"They will actually be exposed and be able to experience activities related to leadership. This will give them experience, which can be hard to get when you don't have any experience to begin with. Another positive outcome is the scholarship opportunities they may have in the future as a result of their involvement," Knutson stated.

As the program expands to other counties within the 20-county region it covers, Knutson said he is hoping to see the involvement of MVTHS students expand.

"We would absolutely love to see more students get involved in this next year. Anytime we see an opportunity like this, we welcome it," he closed.

Sentinel 5/13/09