

Letters from elected officials part of BC3 celebration of high school equivalency grads

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(Butler, PA) A letter of commendation from Butler County commissioners and a certificate from a state representative will be sent to the 12 students who earned high school equivalency diplomas through Butler County Community College's adult literacy program in Butler County during BC3's recent fiscal year.

The two documents – one personalized with each student's name and signed by Commissioners Leslie Osche, Kimberly Geyer and Kevin Boozel, and another from state Rep. Marci Mustello – will be included in packages for the students, along with a Class of 2020 tassel featuring blue and white cords.

“We place a very high value on education in our county and recognize that you have taken significant steps in promoting your own education,” reads a portion of the letter signed by Osche, Geyer and Boozel, words appearing below the Butler County crest, an eagle perched atop a blue, gold and green shield.

“For hard work and dedication in achieving an exceptional goal,” reads a portion of the certificate of achievement signed by Mustello, words appearing above a bronze seal embossed with 18 stars encircling an alit torch.

The documents, along with the high school equivalency diploma the students received from the state Department of Education, “are a validation of all the hard work they have put into it, and that they completed something that, for some of them, has been hanging over their head for quite some time,” said Barb Gade, grant director of the college's adult literacy program.

“Now they can point to that and say, ‘I've done it.’”

“They can have successful futures”

BC3's adult literacy program funds free high school equivalency preparation courses and instruction in Butler, Lawrence and Mercer counties. Programs equip students to take General Education Development examinations that measure proficiency in language arts, which includes reading and writing; and in mathematics, science and in social studies.

Forty-four students in Butler, Lawrence and Mercer counties earned high school equivalency diplomas through BC3's program between July 1, 2019, and June 30, Gade said.

They were among the nearly 4,000 students in Pennsylvania who achieved a commonwealth secondary school diploma between July 1, 2019, and June 30 by passing one of two accredited tests or by completing 30 college-level credits at a U.S.-accredited postsecondary institution, said Mary Kay Peters, high school equivalency administrator with the state Department of Education.

Nearly 500 students have earned high school equivalency diplomas through BC3's adult literacy program since 2008, Gade said.

"It's great that we have a facility like Butler County Community College where these students can finish their diploma," said Mustello, R-11, who represents 17 municipalities in Butler County. "These students are now ready to enter the workforce. They may go on to take further classes at BC3 then go on to a four-year school or go to a career and technical school. It's very important that these students continue their education regardless of what age they are so they can have successful futures."

BC3 program "a place to build their hope"

Twenty-two students attending the program in Mercer County and 10 in Lawrence County achieved high school equivalency diplomas between July 1, 2019, and June 30. The students' ages in BC3's programs ranged from 17 to 62.

"The unique thing about BC3's program," Osche said, "is that you see all generations of folks coming through to get their high school equivalency diploma. It's been fun to watch not only young people who may have had something tough happen in their lifetime that sidelined them, or even our older folks who likewise had some challenge that befell them, and they needed a place to build their hope and find an opportunity to move forward."

Grants from the state Department of Education and U.S. Department of Education, and financial gifts from donors fund BC3's adult literacy program, Gade said.

The Rotary Club of Butler PM's 2020 Luncheon for Literacy raised \$12,000 for BC3's adult literacy program, said Osche, president of the Rotary Club of Butler PM and a Luncheon for Literacy committee member. Four Luncheon for Literacy events since 2011 have raised \$32,000 for the program.

BC3's adult literacy program is among the most popular for college employees donating funds during BC3's annual employee campaign, said Michelle Jamieson, associate director of the BC3 Education Foundation.

"It's the beginning of a positive cycle"

Among residents age 25 and older between 2014 and 2018, about 6 percent of Butler County residents, 8 percent of Lawrence County residents and 10 percent of Mercer County residents did not hold at least a high school diploma, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Full-time workers age 25 and older in the third quarter of 2019 without a high school diploma had median weekly earnings of \$606, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"These are people in very entry-level jobs in their 30s, 40s and 50s," Boozel said.

By earning a high school equivalency diploma, "It helps them succeed toward better employment, a better lifestyle, a better quality of life," said Boozel, whose mother, Alice Boozel, received an honorary high school equivalency diploma at age 73. "But beyond even individually, it helps their next generation, who see their accomplishments and how hard that person has worked."

Full-time employees age 25 and older in the third quarter of 2019 with a high school diploma but without college credits had median weekly earnings of \$749, and for those with some college or an associate degree, \$874, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"I'm grateful that BC3 has this program," said Geyer, whose mother, Nancy Clark, earned a high school equivalency diploma at age 29. "I want other people in Butler County to have the same opportunities as everyone else. Education helps people in the workforce. It adds to our economy. It creates self-sufficiency and enhances the quality of life for people.

"It's the beginning of a positive cycle moving forward."

Orientation for BC3's next series of high school equivalency preparation courses and instruction begins Aug. 24, Gade said. Face-to-face and other class formats start in September.