

## **Bulldog Warehouse**

Harrisburg High School teacher Jill Bonwell is the Program Coordinator for the Bulldog Warehouse, an in school store staffed and run by seniors that participate in the Jobs for Illinois Graduates (JILG) program. The program, was in the past funded by the Illinois State Board of Education and now affiliated with the Illinois Workforce Education Act, gives Harrisburg High School seniors real world, practical skills as both an employer and employee.



When Mrs. Bonwell began the Jobs for Illinois Graduates Program seven years ago, it focused on developing practical career exploration, development and job search and survival skills. Students learned how to use the Internet and newspaper to look for work, how to prepare a resume and other business writing. Students also participated in career exploration and mock interviews. After a couple of years, Mrs. Bonwell decided that students needed more employment options when they graduated from school and felt running a small business would offer excellent life skills.

Mrs. Bonwell started the Bulldog Warehouse five years ago. Since then, over 150 students have received practical and hands-on experience starting and running their own business. The store,

which opened in February 1999, is located under a stairwell, and was designed and built by the JILG students with the help of the Harrisburg High School Head Custodian.

In the past, students applied to be in the program. Seniors who would benefit most from the skills learned, are admitted after review by an in-house advisory committee headed by Mrs. Bonwell. As a state funded program, a certain percentage of the students must represent the bottom ranks of the class, thus creating a class that is a mixture of talents and abilities, much like the real world of work itself.

The Bulldog Warehouse has a new crew of students each year, so at the start of every academic year, a new business plan is developed to guide their efforts. Becky Williams, the Director of the Southeastern Illinois College Small Business Development Center (SBDC) has worked closely with Mrs. Bonwell since the program's inception to guide the class on their business plans. The Southeastern Illinois College Small Business Development Center is supported by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and the US Small Business Administration. Each year Mrs. Williams or a SBDC representative comes to the class to make a presentation about the purpose and the importance of developing a business plan for any business venture and to coach the students through the process.

The students through an elected board of directors run the store. The officers divide the class into teams to work on the various sections of the business plan. Once the plan is complete, the SBDC reviews the written document and makes suggestions. The entire plan is compiled into a nice presentation format by the SBDC, for each student's academic portfolio. Students then use the plan throughout the year to judge the Bulldog Warehouse's financial projections and performance.

Just like any business owner, the students determine, buy and stock the inventory. Unsurprisingly, the Bulldog Warehouse sells items that appeal to their high school market. Best sellers include candy, gum, snacks and drinks, which are purchased at the local Sam's Club. Students decide on the retail pricing at the store (making sure not to cut into the profits of the school cafeteria), and track, which items are selling out first. Initially the store stocked pens, pencils, paper and notebooks, but the "owners" quickly realized that the real profits came from snacks. Participating students staff the store and get extra credit for working additional shifts. They also lose credits for not lining up a replacement for their shift if they are unable to honor their commitment.

Mrs. Bonwell, along with the students set all the standards, schedules and policies, and determines how the profits are used. Each year students donate a portion of their profits to charitable or educational programs in the community. Past beneficiaries have included the Wal-Mart/JILG Angel Tree program, the Harrisburg Community Park District and East Side School Public Library, etc. Profits this year reached an all time high of \$1700. Each graduating class leaves a "nest egg" for the next class to use to start their store's inventory.

"The SBDC staff is teaching students to realize their dreams by helping them write a business plan and learn how to run their own business" said Becky Williams the SBDC Director. "It is

also educating the students that the SBDC network is available to them for little or no money nationwide” added Mrs. Williams.

Mrs. Bonwell is resigning this year, and the Bulldog Warehouse will, hopefully, continue under different leadership. But the lessons that students learn about entrepreneurship from the Bulldog Warehouse will last a lifetime.

The Southeastern Illinois College Small Business Development Center is a member of the Illinois Small Business Development Center network working in partnership with the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and the US Small Business Administration.