

Donegal Businesses Going the Extra Mile for Students

An amazing network of businesses have collectively supported over two hundred senior cycle students in Donegal this year as part of Business in the Community Ireland's education inclusion programme [The Schools' Business Partnership](#). This network has grown in Donegal over the past eight years and attracts organisations who wish to engage within their own local communities to actively support the development of students, facilitating a real insight into the world of work whilst building their skills for the future and encouraging them to stay at school, complete their education and thus maximise their potential. Some 1,500 students have received the benefit from this staggering commitment over the past eight years in Donegal. This is commendable when considering the economic climate our companies have been operating in over those years.

On face value this sounds very aspirational however a dynamic and talented group of business volunteers have been making a massive impact to the lives of our students and indeed have made a remarkable contribution to our schools and wider communities. These extraordinary role models have worked via partnerships in:

Company Name <i>(Programme Participation)</i>	School
Allied Irish Banks <i>Skills @ Work Programme</i>	Errigal College, Letterkenny.
Donegal Investment Group Plc. <i>Skills @ Work, Student Mentoring & MEP Programmes</i>	Deele College, Raphoe.
Firstsource Solutions UK Ltd. <i>Skills @ Work Programme</i>	Moville Community College.
Inishowen Engineering Ltd. <i>Skills @ Work; MET & Time to Read Programmes</i>	Crana College & Scoil Íosagáin NS, Buncrana.
Letterkenny Institute of Technology <i>Skills @ Work, MET & MEP Programmes</i>	Carndonagh Community School, Carndonagh.
Letterkenny Institute of Technology <i>Skills @ Work & MEP Programmes</i>	Rosses Community School, Dungloe.
Marks & Spencer <i>Skills @ Work Programme</i>	St. Columba's College, Stranorlar.
Pramerica Systems Ireland <i>Skills @ Work, MEP, MET & Student Mentoring Programmes</i>	Mulroy College, Milford.
Radisson Blu Hotel, Letterkenny <i>Skills @ Work Programme</i>	Royal and Prior Comprehensive School, Raphoe.
SITA Inc. Ireland Ltd. <i>Skills @ Work Programme</i>	Finn Valley College, Stranorlar.

Six of the ten Skills @ Work partnerships are with Donegal ETB Schools and during the year long programme, volunteers from the companies provided a number of talks and workshops on, 'A Day in the Life of ...', they gave an introduction and background of the organisations; how to build a comprehensive CV and develop good interview skills via mock interviews offered individually to the students. Site visits also took place where the students got to experience the workplace for themselves and to see the various career opportunities that exist within the companies. To top this off most companies offer an additional session such as teambuilding, career choice day, positive communications and time management, all sessions actively contributing immensely to the future development of each individual student and in some cases work experience and shadowing opportunities have also been offered.

Partnerships develop over time and some companies participate in other programmes such as Student Mentoring, Time to Read, Management Excellence for Teachers (MET) and Management Excellence for Principals (MEP) [Programmes](#). Donegal Investment Group and Pramerica have both engaged on all of these programmes with great success. Student Mentoring has been a particular success story where ten students from Deele College and six from Mulroy College have been supported on this programme.

Positive role models can help counterbalance the negative influences young people encounter, particularly within peer groups, media, TV, internet and the unrealistic culture of celebrity by influencing a young person's need to work and contribute to society and developing their aims or dreams in order to better their life chances. My World survey, 2013,* the national survey of youth mental health in Ireland, indicates that the single biggest positive influence on teenagers' development is access to one good adult. For the majority of Irish students, the period between Junior and Leaving Certificate is when they'll make decisions and choices that will set out their future career path including whether they'll progress to further or higher education or whether they'll seek to move directly into the workforce. Many young people who are facing challenging circumstances may find these decisions especially difficult.

The programme pairs employee mentors with a student in their local community in their final two years of education where they spend quality time once a month at the company addressing these decisions. Not just purely business or academic focused, each partnership also arranges a number of outings throughout the year to develop the relationship and bond between the mentors and students with many participants maintaining these unique and strongly supportive relationships beyond completion. Employee volunteers indicate the benefits from participating in the programme include developing their communication, interpersonal, team-building and leadership skills.

Recently at the National Mentoring Celebration Event in Dublin, Mulroy College and Pramerica were presented with certificates to acknowledge their participation and work on the programme. Ellen Dorian, a student from Mulroy College, a key note speaker at the event, stated:

"I have had a great opportunity in having a mentor who has helped me look at every option and opportunity and also helped me to make a decision about what I want to do in the future. With their help and support, I now have the belief that I can do it."

Speaking at the event, Charles Flanagan, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs said:

"The awards being presented today recognise the value of innovative collaboration by businesses, government and the not for profit sector in supporting positive outcomes for our young people. I believe that collaborative programmes like the School's Business Partnership play a pivotal role in young people's personal and social development, increasing their life-skills and employability."

Minister Flanagan added:

"The benefits from the partnership of business and education result in rewards for all partners - mentors within the business community, second-level students, their parents and communities. The excellent working relationships that have developed over the years between the Schools Business Partnership, the School Completion Programme, school managements and staff will continue to be built upon to enhance attendance, participation and outcomes at every level of the system."

Inishowen Engineering has been supporting Crana College for seven years and expanded its involvement to participate in Skills @ Work, MET and have been the first company in Donegal to complete a year of Time to Read with Scoil Íosagáin National School in Buncrana where employees provided reading support to a group of ten children with the aim of increasing the enjoyment and confidence of reading and encouraging self-discovery.

Success in a partnership is underpinned by commitment from all parties and none of the fantastic work would be possible without the active commitment and dedicated support of our schools and in particular the coordinating teachers that volunteer themselves to carry out all the work to make the sessions happen. They are instrumental to developing the relationships with their companies and ensuring that each and every participating student has a positive and meaningful experience. A word too for our Schools Completion Programme coordination team in Donegal who support and work with all of our ten schools on a daily basis and who give active and valuable support and guidance to each programme and have played a very important role in the development of The Schools' Business Partnership activities since the commencement of our first partnership.

All of this activity, by in large, goes on each year quietly without fanfare, however in writing this article it is hoped that we can acknowledge in some small way the **exceptional** work being carried out in our county and say a huge thank you to all of the **exceptional** individuals, companies and schools that contribute to a positive success story for Donegal that we hope will continue to develop and flourish in the future.

The Schools' Business Partnership is managed by Business in the Community Ireland, a corporate responsibility advisory organisation and is funded under the National Development Plan and The Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Anyone interested in more information or if a business would like to participate can contact Elaine McFadden, Regional Coordinator – Donegal, emcfadden@bitc.ie, Tel: 086 170 5954.

* *My World Survey 2013 - A national study of youth mental health in Ireland by Dr Barbara Dooley & Dr Amanda Fitzgerald, UCD School of Psychology in conjunction with Headstrong – the National Centre for Youth Mental Health.*