

School district 'ready to work'

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Since its introduction last year, the Okaloosa County School District has awarded ready-to-work credentials to 850 students through the Florida Ready to Work Program, earning recognition as the Top Performing school district in the state.

Ready-to-work credentials are nationally recognized and tell potential employers that the bearer is qualified to work. Students earning a gold-level credential, the highest available, show they have the skills necessary to be successful at 90 percent of today's jobs, according to the Florida Ready to Work Program. Students also can earn credentials at the silver or bronze levels.

Credentials are awarded based on scores on assessment tests in applied math, locating information and reading for information. Those are skills required to complete 85 percent of jobs today, according to Tiffany Koenigkramer, the state project coordinator.

Crestview High School took the lead in awarding 422 credentials, the most of any school in Florida. Crestview's strategy for success began with coordinators asking themselves, "How can we get our students excited about taking yet another test?" said Victor Long and Brett McCrary, the school's program coordinators.

"This credential shows that this student has taken a conscious step to show the employer, 'I have the skills I need to come into this job and be a faithful and dependable employee for you,' " Crestview Principal Ed Coleman said.

The assessments also can help students prepare for the FCAT, SAT and ACT college entrance exams.

Coleman said that one student participated in the program after receiving a low score on the ACT. After completing the Ready to Work assessments and receiving a credential, the student retook the ACT and passed.

"According to her own testimony, the change was because she completed the assessments," Coleman said.

Students who were pursuing a vocational track after high school and those in job-training programs were the first ones encouraged to take the assessments at Crestview.

Seniors receiving a gold-level credential also were placed into a drawing to win a \$500 scholarship at the end of the school year, which attracted a number of test takers. Funding for the scholarship incentive and the program's cost is partially covered by a state supplement, which provides \$15 to the school for each assessment completed.

So far in the program's second year, the school has scheduled 600 students for testing, according

to McCrary.

Okaloosa was recognized as the highest achieving school district in the state and was presented with a \$1,000 check from the Florida Ready to Work Program during a recent School Board meeting.

"While the recognition and the money is nice, that is not our ultimate goal," School Board Chairman Chuck Kelley said. "Those 850 students are why we do this."