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Coatesville's Air Force Junior ROTC Program Thriving After Crosstown Agreements with Other Districts

After several years of low enrollment, the Air Force Junior ROTC program at the Coatesville Area School District is on solid footing. Recent "Crosstown Agreements" with two local school districts have boosted participation, and after receiving the highest rating at a recent inspection, the program is thriving.

In 2020, low enrollment threatened to decommission the program. U.S. Representative Chrissy Houlahan, herself an Air Force Veteran, reached out to the Air Force and helped secure a two-year probation period to raise the program's numbers. A crosstown agreement with the Oxford Area School District boosted student enrollment in the 2020-21 school year, as did an agreement during the 2022-23 school year with Downingtown West and Downingtown East High Schools.

Crosstown students are transported to Coatesville each day to take the AFJROTC class and can stay after school for extracurricular activities. After starting an experimental 8th grade program and bringing Oxford Area students into the program, the agreement with Downingtown has brought enrollment up to 108 students, which released the program from "probation" by the Air Force.

"Air Force JROTC gives us the opportunity to learn new things, have new experiences, and meet new people, while also being able to help our community," said Downingtown 12th grade Cadet Senior Master Sergeant Isis Young.

In December, 2022, a comprehensive program evaluation by Air Force Junior ROTC Headquarters resulted in an 'Exceeds Standards,' the highest possible rating, for the program.

"The program appears to have a bright future in our region," said retired Lt. Colonel James Turnbull, Senior Aerospace Science Instructor at Coatesville Area High School. "The cadets worked tirelessly, staying long after the school day ended and coming in on weekends to prepare the unit for the evaluation. Their efforts really paid off as they showcased the many excellent facets of our program."

"The Exceeds Standards rating is a testament to the dedication of the cadets," said Retired Master Sergeant Chris Sidoli, the unit's Aerospace Science Instructor. "They are truly an asset to the school and community."

"My cadets and I were very proactive in preparation for this inspection," said Cadet Colonel Nathanael Sweeney, a 12th grader at Coatesville Area High School. "Every cadet put in the work in their own way and it definitely paid off."

AFJROTC cadets from Coatesville, Oxford and Downingtown participate in activities at all three schools. The students also take part in community projects in each of the three school districts, and attend field trips to service academies, national battlefields, museums, and historic sites. The cadets unfurl a large American Flag on the field during football games and provide Color Guards at various school and community events.

"Being a crosstown Oxford Cadet really gives us an opportunity to improve our dedication, integrity, and truly serve our community," said 12th grade Cadet Major Ian Torrens. "We are very grateful to our administration that we get to participate in this program."

Only a small percentage of Junior ROTC students pursue a future with the military. The citizen development program provides participants with a sense of belonging and what Turnbull says is a family atmosphere.

“Cadets develop leadership skills, organize activities, learn to work as a team, and build a strong resume,” he said.

One memorable field trip for the cadets was Arlington National Cemetery, where they visited the gravesite of Corporal Michael J. Crescenz, a Philadelphia native awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor after his death in Vietnam in 1968. Corporal Crescenz's brother Joe, whose children graduated from the Coatesville Area School District, also played a role in the push to retain the program.

"Air Force Junior ROTC creates an ethical and moral background for these young men and women," Crescenz said from his home in Coatesville. "It gives them community and belonging and can help them begin to find the meaning in their lives."

The JROTC experience connects these students with their communities and their leaders.

"My experience in Air Force ROTC during college gave me a profound sense of pride for and connection to our students," said Representative Chrissy Houlahan, who represents Chester County and southern Berks County in Congress. She calls the program transformative.

“These students, led with selfless service by Lt Col. Turnbull, have demonstrated their character and commitment to our community time and again,” she said. “I very much wish this program continued success.”



Cadet Cameron Harrison prepares to lead JROTC cadets in a drill demonstration.



Retired Colonel Gina Humble from AFJROTC Headquarters inspects cadets during a unit evaluation at Coatesville Area Senior High School.