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# Effort to promote STEM education takes off like a rocket

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**By Julie Anderson / World-Herald staff writer**

Robots. Rockets. Raspberry Pi's.

They're some of the tools educators, scientists and business people are using to spark children's interest in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM.

The idea is to hook them early — efforts have pushed as far down as prekindergarten — and keep them involved through middle school, high school and into college, with the hope that they'll make it a career.

"We see it at pretty much all ages now, the idea being the younger you start, the better you are later," said Rita Martens, lead consultant for the Iowa Department of Education.

Such efforts also appear to be growing, from the White House to the schoolhouse.

A key focus is to make STEM fun and real and to show students it can lead to interesting and lucrative careers.

Two events in the Omaha area Saturday focused on just those goals. A free workshop brought together 50 teachers, of third through sixth grades from seven school districts, for training in best practices to engage students in STEM. Offered by Sally Ride Science and the Northrop Grumman Foundation, it's one of five that will be staged across the country this year.

Iowa Western Community College also partnered with Google for the second year to bring 15 STEM teams from nine area high schools together for the Anti-Gravity Games competition.

Matt Kasper, director of marketing for Sally Ride, said the aim of the organization founded by the first American woman in space is to connect students with careers.

Though talking physics in the classroom might cause some students' eyes to glaze over, focusing on a career as an astronaut is more likely to keep their eyes on the prize in school.

"By keeping them engaged in STEM, they can achieve the lifestyle they want while doing something that really makes the world a better place," Kasper said.

Russ Anarde, Northrop corporate lead executive, said the target audience is broad.

"Kids who might not necessarily see STEM as for them, when it's presented in forms that are interesting to them, (it) might turn them around," he said.

Anarde said the company is looking to refresh and diversify its workforce. In parts of the aerospace and security industry, half of the technical workforce is eligible for retirement.

Besides sponsoring events such as the teacher training, volunteers from Northrop Grumman also go into local schools.

Three engineers this year mentored a fledgling robotics club at Belle Ryan Elementary in the Omaha Public Schools. Volunteers also started a tech club at Omaha South High, supplying 10 Raspberry Pi's — simple, inexpensive credit card-size computers that can do facial recognition software or fly drones. One engineer started teaching students binary code.

Neither Nebraska nor Iowa has separate standards for STEM education. In Nebraska, STEM concepts are embedded in the state academic content and career education standards. In Iowa, they're part of math and science standards.

The Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce's Prosper Omaha initiative includes an education focus.

Iowa has a Governor's STEM Advisory Council. Created by executive order in 2011, it's a partnership of business, policy and education leaders from across the state. Through the council, the state is divided into six hubs, coordinated between colleges and K-12 schools, which provide grants for programs for students as young as preschool.

Jacci Linn, the council's communications manager, said people will continue hearing about STEM as long as there is a demand for people to fill STEM-related jobs.

Several area schools have well-established STEM programs, and a number continue to add offerings. Omaha North is a STEM magnet school, and Papillion-La Vista offers a popular four-year STEM Academy at both of its high schools.

Linn and Scott Kneifl, STEM Academy coordinator at Papillion-La Vista High, each stressed that job opportunities are available for students with both two-year or four-year post-high school degrees.

"Business and industry in Omaha are screaming loud for kids with technical skills," Kneifl said.

Both the Council Bluffs and Lewis Central schools offer the nationally recognized Project Lead the Way curriculum at the high school and middle school levels. And Council Bluffs' Crescent Elementary launched the elementary version this year.

Westside will offer a STEM Academy class for freshmen next fall, and Lewis Central will add another set of middle school courses. Officials with both of those districts noted they're working to embed STEM into math and science instruction.

Kim Jones, Lewis Central's curriculum and instruction coordinator, said the district also has been working to revitalize STEM summer learning offerings.

"It's kind of like a perfect storm if you're in that area of education," she said.

Read it on their website: <http://omaha.com/article/20140510/NEWS/140519817>

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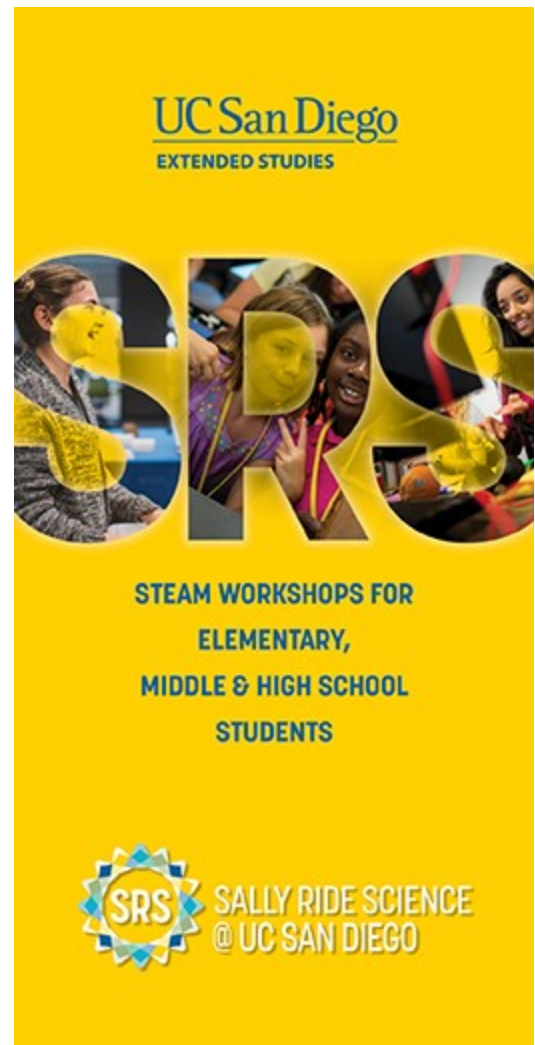
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