

Is STEM Education the Key to High School Success?

How One Central Florida Organization is Preparing Foster Teens for life after High School

During the latest meeting of the High School High Tech program through Community Based Care of Central Florida (CBCCFL), a room full of teens diligently wrote down their goals. The room was quiet as they each concentrated on the task at hand. The speaker, Isa Adney, who had just finished her talk about community college success, taught the students how to set long-term goals by planning achievable tasks.

After a few minutes, Adney asked if everyone was finished and prepared to move on with her presentation, satisfied with the students' reflections. But one girl in the back of the room raised her hand and asked: "can we share our goals?"

One by one, the students shared their goals. One had a goal of earning a better GPA, another wanted to play soccer professionally, and another just wanted to graduate high school. Each teen shared their goal to the group without being prodded to do so. "That's what High School High Tech is all about," says Prita Chhabra, the High School High Tech Program Coordinator "It's about creating a sense of community."

A Different Type of Mentoring Program

High School High Tech (HSHT) is a program offered by the Community Based Care of Central Florida in conjunction with the Able Trust Foundation to foster care teens in Orange, Seminole, and Osceola counties. The focus of the program is to introduce them to science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) related opportunities in both post-secondary studies and future careers. The goal of the program is to increase the graduation rate of the program's participants.

However, the CBC's HSHT program doesn't just focus on science and technology. The program also recognizes that both art education and community service is an important factor in encouraging youth. The program's art initiative encourages artistic self-expression and creativity among teens that, according to a study by The National Endowment of the Arts, has been shown to increase their overall GPA. It has also made a solid effort to incorporate community service projects into the program to show the youth how they can give back to the community no matter what life situation they are in.

According to research from US Department of Education, only 41% of foster youth who make it to 11th grade graduate from high school. HSHT is trying to raise that percentage in the Central Florida area by equipping teens with the tools necessary to strive in the future workforce. Because STEM is a popular buzzword when it comes to talking about the future of the American workforce, the program's focus is to introduce viable opportunities in those career paths. According to the National Science Foundation, 80% of jobs will require some level of math, technology, or science skill.

While the Able Trust sponsors thirty-nine HSHT programs all over the state of Florida, CBCCFL is offering the only program in the country geared towards foster youth and spanning multiple counties. Although the program has a minimum participation requirement of fifteen students, thirty-two are participating in the program this year. "None of the participants have dropped out, and I've already had three get their GED this year," says Chhabra.

Karla Radka, the Vice President of Community Impact and Leadership Development was a part of the effort to bring HSHT to Community Based Care. While the CBC already has a one-on-one mentoring program, Radka saw an opportunity where teens could explore the possibilities of the life they could have after high school in a group environment. "I wanted the youth to plan ahead and dream. To know that their life can be transformational and that they can make a difference in their community," says Radka.

More than just STEM

The group meets twice a month. One meeting is geared toward teaching the soft skills that students will need in their future careers such as teamwork, communication, and problem solving. "We want our youth super prepared, so when they have a job, they have the skills to keep that job," says Chhabra.

The other monthly meeting is to introduce the teens to STEM and art related activities, and community service projects in "an effort to educate them about careers they didn't know about before," says Chhabra. A past activity included a Graphic Design professor from UCF, Victor Davila, teaching the teens the use of art and technology in combination. Another activity brought the teens to a computer lab where they learned how to code Angry Birds while learning about computer programming.

Because the goal is to prepare the teens for graduation and help them realize a successful life after high school, some of the field trips don't focus on STEM, but on career development in general. "Being able to see themselves as someone capable and as someone who can accomplish things that they want to accomplish was amazing," says Chhabra. They did this by taking a career assessment test through Career Source Central Florida to help them understand what jobs would be a good fit for them. Then another trip allowed them to dress in interview clothing through Dress for Success. For many, it was the first time they ever saw themselves in a blazer or professional attire. They even got to keep all the clothes, shoes, and accessories they liked so they could go home with professional business attire.

The efforts of the staff and volunteers involved with CBC's High School High Tech program are already paying off. Their program won the state award for Public Organization of the Year for 2013-2014. Radka is so proud of what the teens in this program have already accomplished and she believes that it'll make a significant impact in their lives. "I believe in this program because we need a society that has more equality. To be more inclusive" Radka says looking towards the future of the program and its youth. "It should be a place for individuals who have disabilities, come from the foster care system, or have different struggles in their lives to understand that not everyone is the same, but everyone can have an opportunity to succeed."

Everything that the High School High Tech program is doing is preparing teens to understand what life will be like after high school and offering pragmatic options about what to do next. It's teaching them that they don't have to be raised a certain way to be successful as adults: which is an important lesson for foster children. By creating a safe environment for them, the students are able to explore what the next stage in their life will be like and what concrete steps they need to take now in order to achieve it.

