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Program connects students, innovators

BY JERRY SIEBENMARK
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Kansas Technology Enterprise Corp.'s Pipeline program and Youth Entrepreneurs Kansas have formed a partnership.

Called Pipeline to Pipeline, the aim is to use Pipeline innovators and their mentors to get high school kids interested in technology entrepreneurship.

"(Pipeline) innovators are usually young, hip and exciting folks," said Kylie Stupka, executive director of Wichita-based YEK. "If we could get those young, cool, fun people in front of these students... we might get some young people thinking in a different direction.

"My students simply need other influencers."

YEK, a program to teach at-risk youth business and entrepreneurship, operates in 23 high schools in and around Wichita as well as Topeka, Lawrence and Kansas City.

The aim is to use the Pipeline innovators -- technology entrepreneurs who have gone or are going through the Pipeline program -- and their mentors to volunteer in a variety of ways.

Those ways include serving as mentors to students, guest speakers at YEK classes and business plan advisers.

Stupka said other possibilities could include innovators allowing students to shadow them in their jobs, providing tours of their companies or offering internships.

Stupka says the hope is not just to get YEK students interested in technology, but also science, mathematics and engineering.

"We have the infrastructure in place to do everything," Stupka said. "All I need them to do is sign the application and say, 'I'm on board.'"

So far, seven innovators and mentors have signed up, Stupka said, and "I have kind of been planting the seed with a couple of others."

Pipeline president Joni Cobb said the initiative has taken a back seat to a recommendation in Gov. Kathleen Sebelius' budget that would eliminate Pipeline and most of KTEC.

The budget recommendation "has kind of distracted folks from the attention that the collaboration deserves," Cobb said.

Cobb and Stupka said discussions regarding the partnership began last year.

Cobb said it fulfills an important part of Pipeline's mission, which is to foster a high-tech entrepreneurial environment in the state.

"It really fits the mission," Cobb said.

Reach Jerry Siebenmark at 316-268-6576 or jsiebenmark@wichitaeagle.com.

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