



Baltimore Students building steps to a bright future

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Students from Baltimore City and County have been given the opportunity to participate in a program that sees 94 percent of its participants off to college.

Building STEPS (Science, Technology, Education Partnerships) is non-profit organization that exposes underserved high school students to science and technology-based careers, and helps them excel in fields where minorities are overwhelmingly underrepresented.

The program recently expanded to Milford Mill Academy, Randallstown and Forest Park High School with a grant from Baltimore County business Walman Optical.

“Building STEPS moved to Baltimore in 2000. We started in an effort to help very bright-underserved kids develop their interest in math, science and technology and get into college. The first three schools we chose were: Woodlawn, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Digital Harbor High schools. We chose those schools based on their student population and proximity to one another. We wanted schools that are not only close to one another, but that were close to jobs,” says Debra Hettleman Plant, executive director of Building STEPS.

Building STEPS started out as an internship program in Washington, D.C.. The program was revamped, and the students start the program as juniors in high school.

“The students start the program in September. We take them out of school as a group (kids from all three schools), and we go to places that rely on science and technology. The idea is to show them what they can do with their interest. Most of our kids are raised in blue-collar households where maybe only one parent works. We are exposing them to a professional environment-we do that while they are juniors-and the summer between junior and senior year, they do paid internships in a place that relies on science and technology. When they are seniors, we work with them very intensely on their college application process and help them get into college,” says Plant.

Plant says it is important for the students to have a support system. “When they are in college, we stick with them and provide a safety net. We have alumni programs and peer mentoring-in addition to seminars, internships, and college counseling.”

The students are performing so well in the program that they are recruited by some of the top schools in the county. “One graduate has accepted a full ride to Georgetown University, how great is that?” she said.

Building STEPS is the brainchild of Matthew Weinberg, CEO of The Weinberg Group, who realized that he did not have enough minorities working for him on a professional level. After not being able to find an existing program to latch on to, he decided to start Building STEPS and level the playing field for underserved students. Building STEPS is currently in their seventh year of existence.

“We stick with our kids through college and even after college. We want the kids to be proud of what they have done. We want them to come back, mentor, talk and continue to be apart of this group- Building STEPS.

“As the needs of our students grow, we have grown. In November, we hired our first program officer and he is a graduate of Building STEPS. He graduated from Saint Mary's College. For the first time, I have written letters of recommendation for Doctoral Degrees. Who knows where these kids are going to go, or how high they are going to reach,” said Plant.

Students interested in participating in the Building STEPS program should have a minimum 3.0 GPA, a 90 percent school attendance record and an interest in science, math and technology and attend one of the six school mentioned above.

For more information on Building STEPS visit www.BuildingSTEPS.org or call 410-308-4800.