



FloridaLearns STEM Scholars

STEMcentric Counseling Helps Motivate Gifted and Talented STEM Students

Florida's rural high school students participating in the *FloridaLearns STEM Scholars* Initiative for Gifted and Talented Students face unique challenges as they prepare for a degree and career in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). To address these challenges, STEM counselors were selected to work directly with the students to offer a high level of support as they engage in an intensive STEM curriculum. The guidance counselors ensure each student's course work is individualized to align with his/her areas of strength and interest, encourage students to capitalize on their academic promise by taking the most rigorous STEM courses available, promote STEM career awareness, provide scholarship assistance, and support the social and emotional needs of STEM Scholars.

STEMcentric counseling is only one component of the *FloridaLearns STEM Scholars* Initiative. Across the Florida Panhandle and in Central and South Florida, regional consortia, Panhandle Area Educational Consortium (PAEC), Northeast Florida Educational Consortium (NEFEC) and Heartland Educational Consortium (HEC) are working under a \$4.5 million dollar, 3-year state grant to facilitate student access to a rigorous STEM curriculum and provide collaborative problem-solving experiences to 27 small, rural school districts in the state. Working with STEM –related higher education faculty, military, business, industry, philanthropic organizations and many other stake holders, the initiative is designed to address the concerns and growing need for a STEM-ready workforce in the future.

“Several consortia staff members, mentor teachers, school administrators, and our public and private partners are working with us to encourage, motivate, and facilitate opportunities for our gifted and talented students to successfully complete a STEM education and ultimately help boost Florida's economy with STEM relevant careers,” said Brenda Crouch, *FloridaLearns STEM Scholars* Project Manager. “STEMcentric counselors help these students with class selection, career choices, and scholarships plus much, much, more,” she added.

The *FloridaLearns STEM Scholars* Initiative is also designed to build a replicable model to ensure rural gifted and talented students in grades 9-12 (or other grade configurations) receive individualized services that engage them in rigorous STEM curriculum and career ready experiences well into the future. STEMcentric counseling is a very important component of this model.

Sheri Brooks, the STEM counselor working STEM Scholars in Washington, Holmes, and Walton school districts, identified two barriers she has observed that appear to hinder some students from choosing STEM careers. “Cultural bias (in rural regions) discourages women and minorities from entering these career fields and many times financial constraints”, she reported in a recent survey conducted by project leaders. However, she added, “the enthusiasm of the students was a surprise to me. Many are excited about their future and see the preparation needed as a means to reach their goal.”

STEM Counselor Nikki Bethea, who works with STEM Scholars in Jackson, Calhoun, Liberty, and Gulf Counties, said, “The career explanation was an eye opener for many of the STEM students. Seeing how advanced degrees and additional schooling can lead to increased salaries was an encouragement for many of them.”

Pat Desilet, the STEM counselor serving students in Gadsden, Jefferson, Madison, Taylor, and Wakulla Counties, said, “I believe one of the most beneficial aspects of the *FloridaLearns STEM Scholars* counseling component is the frequency of visits provided by the counselors –maybe not one specific activity but the combination of the various activities and conversations we have with the students, individually and in groups that make the difference.”

In south Florida Debbie Gillis works as a STEM counselor for the Heartland Educational Consortium. Some of the students she works with seem “driven to excel” and “want to please their families and make their parents proud.” “Most”, she added, “push themselves to achieve at the highest levels.”

The recent urgent alarms issued by Florida and the nation’s economic development stakeholders concerning our students’ lagging science and math skills, when measured globally, helped shape the Florida Department of Education’s winning Race to the Top Application in 2010. The plan incorporated a critical, strategic element to capture the talent potential of one of the state’s most underserved groups, its gifted and talented students from 27 small rural school districts across Florida. The *FloridaLearns STEM Scholars* Initiative for Gifted and Talented Students helps close that gap.



PAEC STEM Counselors

Patricia Desilet— Madison, Taylor, Jefferson, Gadsden, Franklin, and Wakulla Counties

Nikki Bethea—Jackson, Calhoun, Liberty, and Gulf Counties

Sheri Brooks—Washington, Holmes, and Walton Counties