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Arizona Opportunities Industrialization Center Encourages At-Risk Students to "Think Big"

"GAP" Youth Project STEM Program

PHOENIX – Teens from underrepresented communities throughout the Phoenix Metropolitan area began a series of workshops designed to introduce them to education in a variety of careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). The "GAP" Youth Project seeks to increase individualized attention and academic enrichment for youth and their families. Funded in part by the Department of Economic Security (DES) through its Division of Employment and Rehabilitation Services (DERS), DES strives to help Arizonans attain economic sustainability through access to jobs and training.

"It is imperative that we provide Arizona's youth with opportunities such as the STEM program early in their educational journey," said Director Timothy Jeffries. "The program participants represent our future inventors, leaders, educators and contributors to Arizona's economic future."

Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC) Chief Executive Officer and President, Dr. Gene C. Blue, kicked-off the program yesterday by stating, "I want to encourage you youngsters to think big! Imagine and do bigger and more creative things beyond your current situation or what you see today. There's so much more. A focus in STEM can help take you there."

The goal of the Workforce Readiness program is three-fold: 1) prepare youth with soft and hard skills needed for workforce success; 2) increase life skills training for the entire family and enhancement in students' academic skills in math and technology; and 3) introduce "The GAP" youth to future careers in math, science and technology.

According to the United States Census Bureau, many schools in underrepresented communities are underperforming and less than 40 percent of adults in these areas have a high school diploma or GED (Census 2000). Low-income areas in these communities have a poverty level of 34.3 percent, which is more than double the rate of the City of Phoenix, and more than four times the rate of poverty for the entire state of Arizona. The unemployment rate in these areas are also highly disproportionate to the City of Phoenix's 8.4 percent (2000), while in low-resourced communities the unemployment rate may be as high as 15 percent. As a result of these statistics, DES is actively investing into the hopes, dreams and future job awareness for these very deserving young people.

Latonya Jordan-Smith, Public Information Officer for DERS, also spoke with students and shared her own childhood journey through state-sponsored youth programs and her pursuit of education in biomedical engineering and broadcast-journalism.

"If not for programs like this," explained Jordan-Smith, "I may not have ever heard about the various disciplines in the field of engineering available to me or truly believe that, as a young Black girl hungry for challenge and opportunity, I could really excel in the arts and sciences. Well, I did. That's why I'm so excited that our DES believes in you and cares so deeply about my life, your life and your future success in the Arizona workforce."

Youth ages 13 through 15 will continue to meet in all-day programming through August 31, starting with the enhancement of math and science academic skills necessary for success in the classroom and on-the-job soft skills like resume writing, dressing for success, office communication techniques, emotional intelligence, workplace survival and interviewing skills. Youth will attend classroom work-related training in the morning followed by work site placements in the afternoon. The future workforce participants will also be provided with an Individual Employment Plan (IEP).

To learn more about DES services and the ways it supports Arizona families, [visit the DES website](#). For more information about the "GAP" Youth Project, visit the [Arizona OIC website](#), or contact them at (602) 513-8311.

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