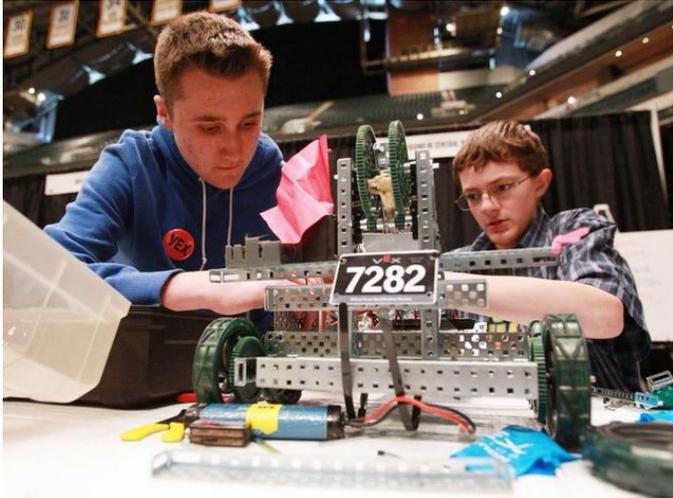


Erika D. Smith: Indy robotics contest a cool oportuntiy to support education

Written by Erika D. Smith
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Josh Krieg and Justin Jeult from Franklin Central High School change the battery in their robot during the Vex Robotics Competition in January at Bankers Life Fieldhouse. / Star file

Three years ago, I got roped into driving to Lawrence North High School on a Saturday morning for the Indiana Robotics Invitational. I had no idea what to expect, other than maybe something like the android character on “Star Trek: The Next Generation.”

What I found instead was far more impressive. I saw students, toting power tools and laptop computers, climbing all over complicated rolling machines the size of loveseats. They had built these robots from the ground up, and they were programmed to play, of all things, soccer. They were teenage engineers.

That day, I remember wondering: Why don't more schools do this?

Well, apparently Mayor Greg Ballard wondered the same thing. And now they do.

This weekend, hundreds of students will gather at Banker's Life Fieldhouse for the second [annual VEX Robotics Championship](#). It's a citywide competition that will bring in teams of robot-building teens to compete for a massive trophy and a full scholarship to Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology.

“As we've thought more and more about what the city needs to be ultimately successful on the education front, we have this belief that we live in an information age economy. And the system of education we've built is part agrarian ...and its part industrial,” said Jason Kloth, deputy mayor of education for Indianapolis. “The hope behind this citywide competition is to call attention (to) and place as much value on STEM and on robotics as we place on basketball or football.”

Talk about a lofty, but worthy goal.

We talk a lot about improving schools and creating a highly educated work force in this city, but what are we actually doing about it? As a community, how are we actually supporting the students who succeed academically?

Because careers in STEM -- that's Science, Technology, Engineering and Math -- are what's next. Advanced manufacturing, information technology and robotics, just to name a few, are fields that are growing and likely will continue to grow. And yet, many students aren't interested in those careers. Or at least they think they're aren't. To change this mindset, we need to find ways to boost interest and make being an engineer seem not only exciting, but plausible.

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Hosting a citywide robotics competition — and having the larger community come out to support it — is one way to do that.

The students and the schools are certainly doing their part.

In just one year, the VEX Robotics Championship has grown from 36 teams of high school students to 48 teams from high schools and 40 teams from middle schools. Some of the teams are from the wealthiest private schools in Indianapolis. Others are from the poorest of public and charter schools. One team is made up of teenagers who dropped out of school and came back to finish their education. Another team is made up autistic students.

The corporate and philanthropic communities are doing their part, too.

The city was able to secure enough donations to [fund](#)

[the entire competition](#) and find sponsors for every team so that no school had to fork over money for a kit to build a robot.

These are things to celebrate. But will the rest of us? Will people come out to support these [kids](#)

[on Saturday and Sunday](#) the way they might for a basketball tournament?

People in the community should get behind this. Particularly, people who live in the city's impoverished urban core. Neighborhoods where schools are slowly improving, but parental involvement is often lacking. Places where being good at sports is seen as an out and therefore encouraged, but academic achievement is too often seen as a waste of time and effort, and therefore ignored.

It is in these places where people have no problem coming out to support the high school football team on Friday night. But what about the students who are building robots and learning those all-too-critical math and science skills? They need just as much — if not more — support from us than our high school athletes do.

These are the things we need to think about as we continue to talk about the value we place on education in Indianapolis. We can't just talk about it. We have to be about it, too.

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