

New group hopes to increase support for students doing technology

By Dialynn Dwyer reporter@ithacatimes.com | Posted: Wednesday, July 3, 2013 12:00 am

ITHACA — With so many science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) programs in the Ithaca City School District including Code Red Robotics, Technology Student Association and the Science Olympiad, a nonprofit group has recently sprung-up to support and foster students interested in STEM.

The group, Ithaca STEM Advocates started early in June with the mission of advocating and raising funds for STEM activities in the district and fostering communication and collaboration among the STEM groups in the Ithaca community.

“The need has been around for many years and there’s been a lot of groups that have expressed that they had been working in isolation and not knowing where to go for support,” said Illa Burbank, president of STEM Advocates. “Whether that is help with volunteerism and such or funding.”

The discussion around creating a group like Ithaca STEM Advocates, formatting it like a booster group where parents and others can support student activities, began between three and five years ago, she said. But it was not until the spring of 2013 that the group was formed.

Burbank said the formation was modeled on funding side of Code Red Robotics, which is under the umbrella of the Ithaca Public Education Initiative. The relationship with IPEI allows supporters of Code Red to make donations through IPEI to the group that are tax deductible.

In the coming weeks IPEI will vote to decide whether or not to bring Ithaca STEM Advocates under its umbrella as an affiliate, allowing people to make tax deductible donations to the new group.

Burbank said the hope is the group will develop relationships with sponsors and donors and be able to gather a pool of funds through fundraising that will be readily available when a STEM group or teacher needs assistance.

Burbank came up with a business plan for STEM Advocates as part of a social entrepreneur class she was taking for her MBA. Burbank said with her children participating in robotics and STEM programs, her experience mentoring girls in STEM activities, as well as her own interest in math (she’s the controller at Incodema, Inc.) there were many draws for her to get Ithaca STEM Advocates off the ground.

“It’s a great fit because I’m excited by science and engineering – it’s all really cool to me,” she said.

Burbank said she hopes that Ithaca STEM Advocates will help link STEM teachers and students to resources in the community like Cornell’s synchrotron.

“Our website and our networking is our hope to connect those teachers who have a need and the community members and Cornell and Ithaca College who can help those teachers, which ultimately helps kids,” she said.

Another goal of Ithaca STEM Advocates is to get kids interested in STEM work early, since high school can be too late for students to begin participating.

“One of the primary ones is going to be collaboration and getting the whole community involved in supporting kids and getting them excited about these fields,” said Burbank of the group’s goals. “A lot of science and math that you end up doing in school is very book related and sometimes you can add activities that are hands-on that really make kids make that connection of ‘Oh, that’s why I’m learning the stuff in the book because this is how its applied in life.’ That’s how kids get excited about particular fields. Doing it early.”

While the group only began meeting in June, Burbank said there is already a group within of STEM Advocates looking specifically at how to get more girls interested in STEM.

“There’s a large drop off in the middle school years of girls losing interest,” said Burbank. “So already there’s been a group who we’re getting together to see how we can support girls.”

One of the participants in the group is a high school student who attended the meeting to hear more about the advocates.

“She’s been coming up with great ideas of what if we get a list of companies who are willing to host internships who are willing to have tours so girls can see women in action in those fields and they can imagine themselves in positions,” said Burbank. “So already the ideas are flowing. It’s great.”

Ithaca STEM Advocates has a board of directors and will be setting up a committee dedicated to fundraising and corporate development as well as a Communications Committee that will focus on creating collaboration and networking. Once the group has money for grant requests, a committee will be established for the review of requests for funding.

Burbank said those interested in participating can sign up on the advocates website to become a member, get on a mailing list and be part of the network.

For more information on Ithaca STEM Advocates, visit ithacaSTEM.org