

UpLink matches school, business

UpLink matches school, business; Partnerships include externships for area high school teachers, adding real-life relevance in math, science and technology curriculums.

By **JOE ROBERTSON**
The Kansas City Star

This was exactly the setup Ron Robinson had been looking for.

The Northeast High School teacher had just retraced the familiar grounds of KCP&L's massive Hawthorn plant, where he had worked part of his eight weeks on a summer externship.

Only this time he had returned with a couple dozen of his students from Northeast's engineering and technology small learning community. They'd wandered out in biting winds beneath the plant's towering stacks and turbines, and clustered in its control room, ogling the banks of 30 monitors, the control panels, the dire-looking red cutoff switches.

They'd heard recent high school graduates talk about job opportunities, the chances for continuing col-

lege education, the promise of a career. KCP&L employee Krishaun Smalls, a district graduate, had asked the group: "If you could get \$20 an hour right now, would you take it?"

Right about the moment the students were all nodding and saying something along the lines of, "Well, yeah," Robinson dropped his kicker.

Beginning this month, the school's engineering curriculum will incorporate KCP&L's entrance exam.

Robinson was one of 10 area teachers who spent part of their summer earning \$20 an hour to work with businesses that joined with YouthFriends and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation in a program called UpLink.

Among other partnerships, KU Medical Center matched with Raytown South High School, and American Century joined with Oak Park High School in the North Kansas City School District.

Next summer, UpLink is shooting for 50 externships, said YouthFriend's Laura Norris, with businesses large or small, old or new.

The externship project, TeacherTech, is one of three

prongs in the UpLink initiative launched with a \$5.4 million Kauffman grant to spur school and business collaborations that strengthen the region's math, engineering and technology culture.

"This isn't job-shadowing or make-work," Norris said. The businesses that have created the summer jobs for teachers "are getting top consultants for \$20 an hour."

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LAURA NORRIS, OF YOUTH-FRIENDS, CO-SPONSOR OF THE UPLINK PROGRAM

In several cases, businesses hired teachers to help them improve their efforts to make more students and teachers aware of their workforce needs -- enlightening students about careers and the education they need.

Teachers see firsthand how business and industry apply math and engineering skills that can seem so esoteric to students. They inject curriculum with new relevance.

UPLINK: Partnerships add real life to classrooms

“So much math comes into play,” Robinson said, recalling experiences such as practicing draining tanks in a simulator at KCP&L.

The continuing relationships with businesses also lead to more opportunities for mentors in classrooms and students in workplaces, said Jack Bitzenburg, the Kansas City School District’s director of career and technical education.

“They bring algebra alive in this power plant,” he said. “Physics and math -- it all comes together.”

For businesses, these are the kinds of things teachers can bring to the table:

Raytown South science teacher Jen Dolson incorporated spaghetti noodles and rubber bands into KU Medical Center’s educational unit on orthopedics. The odd assortment would help students understand the strength and elasticity at the stress points of muscles, tendons and bones.

“For her to come up with that was great,” said Ile Haggins, the KU Med director trying to improve the center’s Mini Medical School education program.

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JACK BITZENBURG, THE KC SCHOOL DISTRICT’S DIRECTOR OF CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

In these and other units, Dolson was able to bring ideas for reaching students that were in tune with the needs and limited resources of teachers, Haggins said.

“It’s really a great marriage,” she said.

In addition to orthopedics, Dolson also worked with experts in brain function, ears and hearing, diabetes and nutrition, and immunology and vaccination -- giving her greater insight to the opportunities ahead of her biology and genetics students.

“I have students all the time who want to do something in a medical field, but all they knew was doctor or nurse,” Dolson said.

American Century, in spicing up its financial education programs for schools, knew it wanted Oak Park teacher Angela Beshears to provide some “competitive analysis,”

said Scott Oberkrom, an investments consultant for American Century.

But Beshears also helped the company understand the language and point of view of today’s teens.

The company’s team was talking about its message of long-term investing, Oberkrom said, and the teacher clarified their task, noting, “The prom is long-term for them.”

Breshears, a math and algebra teacher, has refortified her lesson plans with interest formulas and investment concepts and other real-life uses for math.

“I was interested in the connections,” she said. “I can tell them (her students) this is what’s going on in the real world.”

THE DETAILS

UpLink, a joint effort by YouthFriends and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, aims to help schools and businesses collaborate on education. To learn more, go to www.yf-uplink.org.