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Group engineering
A brighter future

Business Education Compact is striving to 'make learning real'

By Jennifer Clampet

Tigard—The local chapter of the Business Education Compact is trying to help stimulate the next generation of engineers whether they like it or not.

Whether it's because of an intimidation from the concepts of physics and calculus or a lack of interest for a career in science and numbers, American students are not flocking to careers in science or engineering.

In 2001, 46 percent of students in China graduated with engineering degrees. In the United States, that number was only 5 percent, according to research from the Southern Methodist University.

Kurt Harrington, the senior environmental engineer with AMEC in Tigard, calls the slump in American engineering grads a "brain drain."



STUDENT ENGINEERS — Fowler students got into the assignment to gather water from different points along Summer Creek.

Jennifer Clampet



Photo by Doug Vorwaller

"In the U.S., we're outsourcing to China and other countries more and more," Harrington said. "(The United States) needs more people to get into sciences."

In Oregon, the local chapter of Business Education Compact is pushing toward that goal with its Making Learning Real program. The program connects professional volunteer engineers with schools, teachers and classrooms around the state.

"If we do our job right," said Mary Beth Horton, deputy director of BEC's local chapter, "we think (students) will be excited about science and math. It's all about making learning real."

The goal of the program is to increase awareness and understanding of how indispensable engineering jobs are.

Instead of math being an abstract thing they'll never use, it actually becomes a means to an exciting (career)," Horton said.

Two weeks ago, with the feel of soft creek bed dirt firmly underneath their wading boots, students in Mary Sue Honstein's sixth-grade science classes at Fowler Middle School excitedly scrambled around gathering water samples from Summer Creek.

Harrington led the classes in testing the waters for pH levels, temperature and turbidity. This wasn't the first time Honstein's students have tested the waters at the creek. They do it on a regular basis and send the tests to the University of Arizona for results. But Harrington's visit was the first time the students had an actual engineer on site to do the testing before their eyes.

The students crowded around the readout equipment positioned on the bridge as Harrington hollered for the creek water associated with the different positions along the bank. All the while, Harrington smiled.



Photo by Doug Vorwaller

"I do this because kids don't always connect engineering with this stuff," Harrington said referring to the outside trek to gather samples. "Kids don't realize that it can be fun. That you don't have to be the best math and science student to be a good engineer. It just takes creativity."