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Engineering academy in Pasco excites students

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NEW PORT RICHEY — Freshman Paul Lampasso thought about transferring out of Pasco County schools just so he could study engineering at East Lake High in Pinellas.

Then River Ridge High in Pasco came up with the same idea, with the help of the man who founded East Lake's program. Now Lampasso gets to mess with robots, experiment with 3-D design software and learn all about the subject that fuels his imagination.

"Oh my gosh, I love this class so much," he said Monday as he practiced creating a three-dimensional coffee cup on his class computer for an assignment on how to improve upon the design of an existing product. "I'm doing something constantly. ... It's all work. I just enjoy it a lot."

River Ridge showed off its new career academy to the public on Monday, taking the time to highlight the team effort among educators, business partners and community leaders who made it happen.

Enrollment doubled

More than the value the academy offers to the school or the businesses, everyone focused on the new opportunities for students like Lampasso.

The school expected 30 kids to sign up for the first year; 67 enrolled, including 10 from outside the attendance zone and one homeschooled teen who comes to River Ridge just for engineering.

"All it takes is just a spark, just an idea or something they see" to show teens the intellectual and professional possibilities that exist for them, said Peter Buczynsky, president of Micron PharmaWorks, one of the academy's business partners. "They are at a point right now where nobody has told them what can't be done."

That was true for sophomore Charlotte Pearce, one of just five girls in the program.

At first, Pearce said, she planned to study architecture.

"I saw this (program) on the Web site and engineering sounded interesting," she said. "I want to do engineering now. I like knowing how stuff works and I like designing things. It's fun to be creative. It's one of my favorite classes."

Teacher Dave Hoffman, a retired engineer, said his goal with the introductory course is to ensure that students first understand how to get their good ideas from their heads onto paper. One of his first assignments involved researching

the design history of a piece of technology.

"If they can't put it on a piece of paper, they can't put it in a computer program," Hoffman said.

Not that they aren't eager to make that leap.

"They're excited about the program. They want to be here," he said. "Most of the kids, I have to turn off the computers. ... They're doing stuff (on their own) and they ask questions. As you show them, they want to do more and more. They want to go so fast."

But the learning needs to come in sequence, so it all makes sense, Hoffman said. So he has to slow them down.

That's not deterring sophomore Joey Spissak. He worked with classmate Lampasso to get the class robotics equipment working after having finished his research project early.

"Every day we're messing with this, and we learn something new," Spissak said.

"I can play with it and figure it out," added Lampasso. "Everything I've ever used, that's how I learned it."

School Board member Kathryn Starkey, who attended the event, noted that county leaders are working to extend the River Ridge program's ties to college courses. It already has partnerships with Pasco-Hernando Community College and St. Petersburg College.

They're in talks to bring courses from Kettering University, rated one of the nation's top undergraduate engineering schools, to Pasco County for both River Ridge and PHCC students to stream into, Starkey said. That news only thrilled the students more.

"That would be awesome," Spissak declared. "I wish (this career academy) was there for my freshman year. Well, sophomore year is just as good."

Pasco now has career academies at all of its high schools. The goal is to provide high-skill, high-wage professional training to students who then can go to college or into the work force after graduation.

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