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The Solution to the S.T.E.M. Crisis

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Sherry Lansing

Founder and CEO of The Sherry Lansing Foundation

Computer Science Education Week kicks off in mid-December with the Hour of Code Campaign, designed to demystify computer coding for millions of K-12 students. It is a bold step in the right direction, as America faces a seminal moment in the future of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) education.

California students rank 43rd in the nation in mathematics and science, according to the California STEM Learning Network. There are fewer than 1 in 6 in-state college students majoring in STEM, despite the fact that there are currently 1.5 million unfilled jobs in STEM fields in California, the STEM epicenter of our nation. How do we explain such sobering statistics?

The answer may lie in the thousands of math and science classrooms in our state that are inadequately staffed. As school districts nationwide clamor to recruit scarce STEM teachers, classrooms are often filled at the last minute with educators certified in other subjects, creating a deficit in student academic readiness. Studies show that the nation will need more than 280,000 new mathematics and science teachers by 2015. Where can we expect to find these vital instructors?

It is difficult to convince college graduates, many with excessive student loan debt, to become high school STEM teachers earning moderate pay and overseeing crowded classrooms. By contrast, the private sector promises global opportunities and six figure salaries. How can we attract and cultivate top-notch STEM educators in such challenging times?

The solution to our STEM crisis is both obvious and exciting: Recruit and transition experienced STEM professionals into second careers as math and science teachers. They can both lead and revolutionize our most underserved school districts. Who better to teach and inspire our next generation of engineers and innovators than STEM professionals who have invaluable insight and real life STEM experience?

This is the mission of the EnCorps Teachers Program, which I founded in 2007. Since then, more than 200 EnCorps tutors, guest teachers, teacher candidates, and full-time credentialed instructors have been making an impact in more than 25 schools and organizations statewide. EnCorps Educators are a heroic group, trading high-profile and lucrative professional careers for less visible work in disadvantaged classrooms. Their commitment to paying-it-forward to tomorrow's youth is phenomenal.

Consider EnCorps Educator Tyran Richards, an energetic former Dow Pharmaceutical chemist who imparts her 12 years of professional experience to students in Fairfield, California. "I want youth to know that there is greatness in each of them and they can accomplish anything through perseverance and hard work," Richards says. David Lai, a former Microsoft software engineer is now teaching math to students in Oakland, California. "It's been a privilege of mine to have many opportunities in life," Lai says. "I want to be a teacher to give kids access to all I've seen and done."

The more shining examples of STEM professionals we can place in our nation's classrooms, the better off students will be. Initiatives like Computer Science Education Week are helping this issue to take center stage, and we must remember that top-quality educators are the true catalyst for our next crop of engineers, creators and visionaries.

As a former high school math teacher, I remain passionate about education. We must put an end to inadequate STEM training, which leads to missed opportunities for college graduates and for America's economic future. Answer the call to give back and build a better tomorrow for our kids. Help to support STEM education and our nation's competitive edge by donating via our website or Rally.org.

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