

MOTION BY SUPERVISOR MARK RIDLEY-THOMAS

APRIL 11, 2017

PROCLAIM APRIL 9 – 15 WOMEN AND GIRLS IN STEM WEEK

Many of the fastest growing occupations in the United States require some form of expertise in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). STEM careers offer high pay and promotional opportunities, providing pathways out of poverty and into the middle class. Moreover, many STEM fields have been identified as high growth sectors in Los Angeles County’s economy.

However, a significant gender gap exists in the STEM workforce. Nationally, women earn nearly 60 percent of bachelor’s degrees, but are underrepresented in STEM-related college degrees, especially in computer science and engineering. While women make up nearly one-half of the working population, they represent only 26 percent of the STEM workforce. The news is worse for Latinas and African-American women, who comprise an abysmal one percent and three percent of STEM professionals nationwide.

According to the American Association of University Women (AAUW), as early as first grade, children have already developed an unconscious bias associating boys with

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math. Many toys still reinforce rigid, highly gendered stereotypes that encourage only boys to build or engineer. By seventh grade, many girls are ambivalent about these fields, and by the end of high school, fewer girls than boys plan to pursue STEM in college.

Fortunately, there are programs that work to counteract such stereotypes, such as Girls Build LA, which incentivizes schoolgirls working in teams to engineer solutions to STEM-related challenges, and Tech Trek, a weeklong science and math summer camp for eighth-grade girls. However, societal and media reinforcement of traditional gender roles sometimes rolls back any progress made during such programming.

The National Academy of Engineering (NAE) found that most K-12 teachers and students (and their parents) have a limited understanding of engineering and what engineers do. They tell students that the prerequisite for success is a strong aptitude for math and science; engineering outreach programs emphasize almost exclusively the importance of math and science and focus on building interest in those subjects. Rather than focusing exclusively on that single story, NAE recommends focusing on how engineers make an impact on the world or emphasizing the need for creativity, communication and teamwork in the engineering profession. It is a more well-rounded and multifaceted approach to generating interest in STEM-related careers. Such an example of rich storytelling can be found in the blockbuster hit, "Hidden Figures," an important visualization of the intersectionality of human experience. The film's protagonists, Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson and Dorothy Vaughn are African-

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American women who are good friends and also happen to be intelligent, driven mathematicians who work for NASA. The film shows that young women, particularly those also racially underrepresented in STEM, can do anything they set their minds to. The importance of repeatedly delivering this message cannot be overstated.

I THEREFORE MOVE THAT THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS:

Proclaim the week of April 9 – 15, 2017 as “Women and Girls in STEM Week” throughout the County of Los Angeles, encourage girls and young women to engage in STEM learning opportunities and activities and acknowledge the many inspirational organizations, programs, and media that promote positive depictions of women STEM professionals.

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