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After-school program gets \$250,000 grant to boost science, math education at middle schools

By Tracy Garcia Staff Writer

A new federal campaign that aims to move American students from the middle to the top of the pack in science and math achievement will get a boost at local schools this year, thanks to a \$250,000 grant awarded to the nonprofit THINK Together program.

The grant from Southern California Edison will support a new robotics program and STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education at 41 middle schools where the nonprofit THINK Together provides after-school programs.

That includes sites within the Bassett and Azusa Unified districts in the San Gabriel Valley, as well as the Los Nietos, Little Lake City and South Whittier districts in the Whittier/Santa Fe Springs region.

"Thanks to the generosity of Southern California Edison, we'll now have Academy of Robotics labs available to students at all of (our) middle school sites," said Randy Barth, founder and chief executive officer of THINK Together, which operates in four Southern California counties.

"The focus of after-school programs is no longer simply fun and games," Barth said. "When aligned with a child's school day, after-school programs can extend a student's annual learning time by up to 50 percent."

The grant coincides with President Barack Obama's "Educate to Innovate" campaign, a nationwide effort announced last week to increase students' skills and knowledge in math and science through public-private partnerships that include leading companies, foundations, nonprofits, and science and engineering societies.

Obama outlined three priorities for STEM education, including: Increasing literacy so all students can think critically in science, math, engineering and technology; Improving the quality of math and science teaching so American students are no longer outperformed by those in other nations; and Expanding STEM education and career opportunities for underrepresented groups, including women and minorities.

At the K-8 Edgewood Academy in La Puente - a THINK Together site - Deborah Moran already has a robotics program for students in grades 6-8 that's yielded good results over the past three years. "It inspires kids to think outside the box," said Moran, adding that the current robotics program will be enhanced by the new THINK Together grant.

"I had a student last year who, after he was in the program, decided he wanted to be an engineer," Moran said. "It makes them become critical thinkers - it takes learning outside of the classroom." With the \$250,000 Edison grant, THINK Together officials said they expect a dramatic enhancement of their current STEM education curriculum.

The new robotics academies will allow students to create in a Computer-Aided-Design program, while still emphasizing workplace skills like teamwork, cooperative learning, problem-solving, critical thinking, analysis and logical development.

"Anything that we can do to help with science and technology - we welcome it," said South Whittier School District Superintendent Erich Kwek, adding that about 100 students are in the THINK Together after-school program at Graves Middle.

"THINK Together is always looking for new ways to bring services - they're applying for grants constantly. It's outstanding," Kwek said. "Parents don't have to pay anything for the program, and it provides academic programs and enrichment every day after school."

The new robotics academies will be implemented at the middle schools sometime in the next few months, including at Edgewood Academy and Graves Middle.

"And exposure to the robotics lab will no doubt put some students on a path to STEM careers," Barth said.

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