



Future-minded Battle Creek educators turn to robots

Multiple boxes of miscellaneous wires, wheels, air compressors and other contraptions were piled up Wednesday in the back corner of the Southwest Michigan Virtual Academy in downtown Battle Creek.

Brandon Mousseau, a 15-year-old student at the online-centric high school, is among a half-dozen kids working to assemble those parts into a robot capable of shooting basketballs into a hoop at an upcoming competition. The kids also must program the software that tells the robot what to do.

Mousseau said that hands-on experience -- which he said taps his math and science skills -- has made him think about becoming an engineer.

"It's definitely an option," Mousseau said. "It is now."

Comments like that are why local schools' recent love affair with robots has become increasingly amorous.

Schools have dabbled with robotics in the past. The Battle Creek Area Math & Science Center has long offered a robotics club (this year it added a robotics course to its class offerings). At the most recent Math &

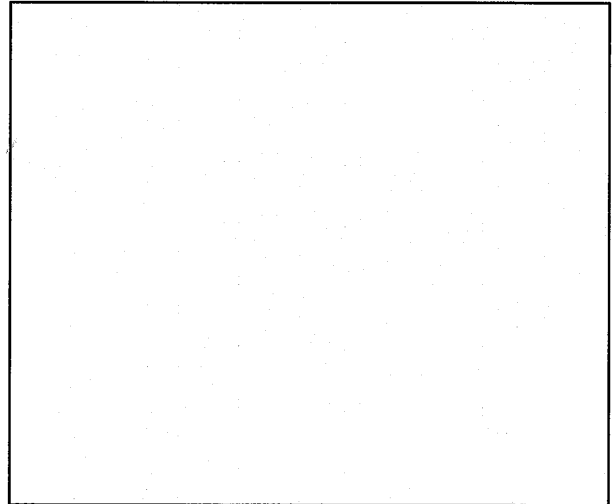
Science Center open house for incoming students, a student-designed robot guided tours of the center.

In the past, robotics clubs were largely left to the math and science whizzes.

But this school year alone, five area school districts -- the Virtual Academy, Lakeview School District, Pennfield Schools, Gull Lake Community Schools and Vicksburg Community Schools -- added robotics clubs to their extracurricular roster. Last year, Harper Creek Community Schools fielded its first robotics clubs in competition. Battle Creek Public Schools also previously fielded teams. The clubs are pulling kids of all kinds, whizzes and just-curious kids alike. Mousseau falls among the latter.

The new teams are part of FIRST Robotics, a New Hampshire-based organization that hosts competitions across the country. So many new schools joined this year that FIRST added a new competition. It happens March 2-3 at Gull Lake High School.

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Educators said part of the reason for the rush is new technology. More parts are available than ever before and advancing software makes it easier to make those parts do different things.

"This is not, 'Danger! Danger, Will Robinson!' from the TV when I was a kid," said Pennfield Superintendent Ben Laser, referring to the famed one-liner of the clunky, toyish robot in TV's "Lost in Space." "The kids do some cool stuff with these things."

But also, as Math & Science Center Director Connie Duncan put it: "It's all part of that STEM push."

STEM stands for science, technology, engineering and math and there's a nationwide drive to boost education in those fields as the workforce demands more innovative thinkers. Battle Creek Public Schools and its Math & Science Center have been leaders in Michigan's push for STEM education.

"You've got the art, you've got the music, but where's the technology?" asked Brian Ziegler, coach of the Pennfield team. "This is kind of the answer to that."

Gail Alpert, vice president of FIRST Robotics in Michigan, said 30 teams were added statewide this year.

Local educators said robotics helps kids think about STEM jobs, even if they hadn't thought of them before. Alpert said FIRST offers \$14.5 million in scholarships

dedicated to robotics club members nationwide.

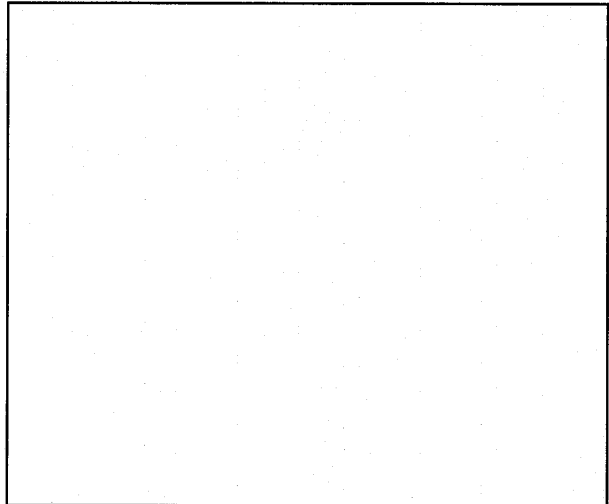
Even outside of STEM jobs, educators said robotics teaches critical thinking and teamwork that can be used in any field. Robotics competitions encourage teams to work with each other. Cindy Fadel, a local volunteer who encouraged the new competition at Gull Lake, said FIRST calls this "coopertition."

The manufacturing industry that supports the Battle Creek area has used robots a long time, but schools are just beginning to woo the little droids as an educational tool. School officials said the cost of running programs can be an inhibitor.

But now, Alpert said, "Employers are understanding this is the wave of the future, and that we're growing their future workforce."

And so, two years ago, JC Penney partnered with FIRST to sponsor teams near each of its stores. Alpert said 36

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teams across Michigan, including Harper's, were started with JC Penney seed money. This year, most local schools started their teams with Strategic Rookie Team grants from FIRST, a pool of money funded by private donations. Alpert said FIRST also offered schools one-year stipends to pay robotics team coaches and mentors.

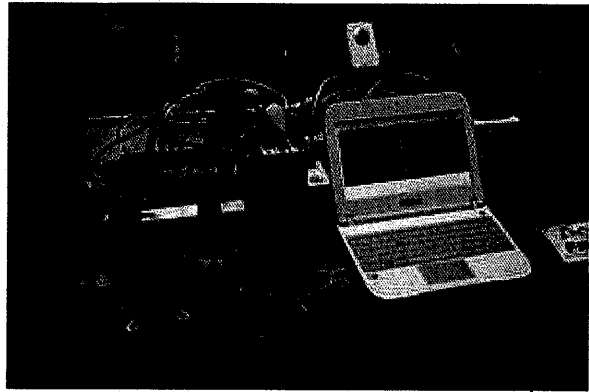
Those rookie team grants diminish over three years, Alpert said, and schools have that long to find local sponsors to continue their programs. Doing so also teaches kids marketing, officials said.

STEM learning and skills-building is good, kids said, but for them, robotics is also just plain fun.

"It's just cool knowing you're doing something real," said Eric Smith, a 16-year-old junior on the Lakeview team. "This is not Fisher-Price."

"You have to be innovative and creative to accomplish goals," said Tyler Root, an 18-year-old senior on the Lakeview team. "It's fun because it's challenging."

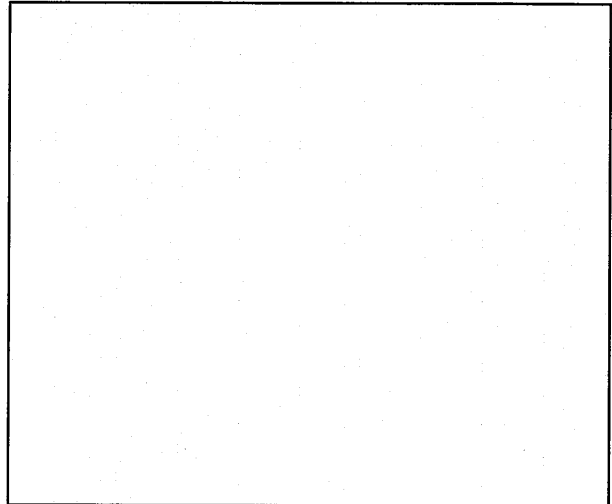
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Educators say robotics teaches critical thinking and teamwork that can be used in any field. Robotics competitions encourage teams to work with each other. / Nick Garrison/For the Enquirer

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