

# Pass It On®...

## Engineering a Better Community.

*Barron Prize winner and high schooler Adeline Smith co-founded Growing the STEM, a nonprofit that creates math and science programs for students in 14 underserved Idaho schools.*

The roots of STEM education, or Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, go all the way back to 1862, when universities that received land grants began promoting agricultural science. In those days, having the foresight to see the need for disciplines in science to improve output was revolutionary.

Early scientific education focused on reaching young American schoolkids to raise a generation of problem-solvers. As the world changed, those disciplines focused on innovations in new materials like synthetic rubber and transportation. By the 1950s, educators were teaching the science of propulsion and everything related to the space race. Twenty years later, we saw developments in computers, cell phones and communications.

The teaching of science has always resulted in young minds becoming great innovators. In 2001, the National Science Foundation formalized the creation of STEM curricula. Yet the new century saw a lot of challenges. Students were falling behind. Amid calls by President Obama to “Educate to Innovate,” there was an emphasis on preparing 100,000 teachers to teach STEM.

Then the pandemic hit. With schools forced to turn on a dime, many kids were left with the second-best teaching method: online. Without in-person teachers and the support of their peers, the working concepts in the sciences were hard to grasp, and students struggled.

Adeline Smith experienced this firsthand. She was a COVID student, isolated. She had also been a tutor for five years, and she knew the power of student-to-student relationships. She saw the need to organize peer-to-peer tutors and, with her sister Lilian, began organizing. After-school tutoring made the most sense because students were already there, and teachers could oversee the effort.

She partnered with local community organizations and sponsors, including the United Way, and built a

team of volunteer supporters. The team also organized an annual fundraiser to pay the teachers for their extra time in the classroom. It all adds up to hundreds of kids improving their skills, discovering new aptitudes and enjoying school more than ever.

“I’ve realized that even a small effort and passion can create an amazing snowball effect,” says Adeline. “And I’ve learned my life’s purpose is in the pursuit of improving things for others.”

School is for everybody. No child should ever feel like they don’t belong, that they aren’t measuring up, that they just don’t have the smarts to make it. Adeline makes kids feel included. She’s very optimistic about the possibilities. She’s created academic clubs at each school to give kids a place to belong, to excel, to feel the triumph of learning.

As the world changes, we need to find ways to engineer our communities to accommodate the problem-solvers who will lead us into the future and the friends who will make sure we get there.

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