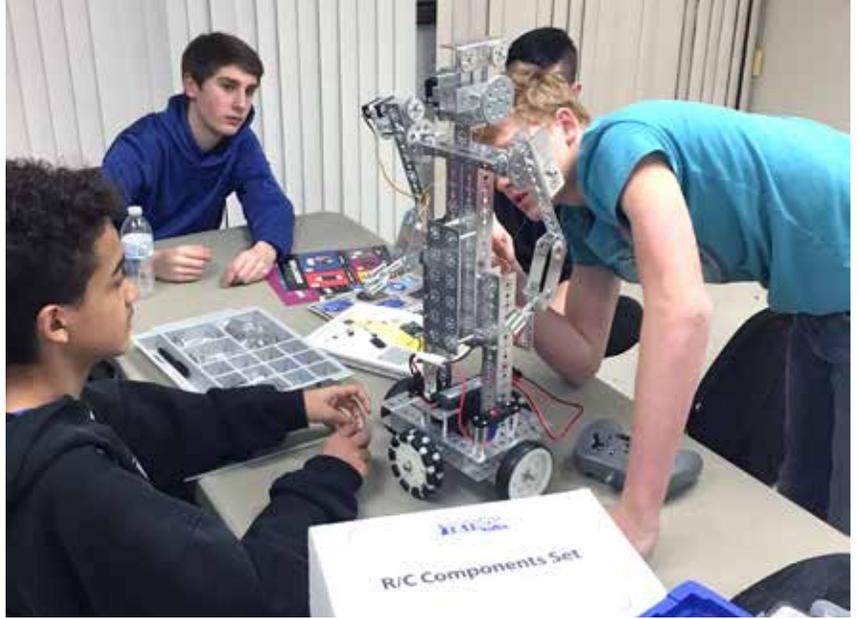


WORKFORCE 2030



# MidAmerica STEM Alliance partners with Pitsco Education





# Leave the teaching to us

Industrial park leadership scraps plans for career center, instead develops future workforce through STEM programs in 17 area school districts

**PRYOR, OK** – The plan was hatched to outfit a 100,000-square-foot career center at the MidAmerica Industrial Park, Oklahoma’s largest industrial park with more than 80 tenants. Students from throughout the region would flock to the career center for part of their school day to hone the exact skills needed by employers desperate to fill numerous openings with trained, well-qualified workers.

Upon closer inspection, though, the grand plan had some logistical gaps of its own, and industrial park leaders went back to the drawing board. Enter education architect Scott Fry, and a new path was planned, one that would branch off to logical destinations – the 17 area school districts within 35 miles of the Pryor industrial park nestled in a rural setting east of Tulsa.

The logic was sound. Let the surrounding school districts do what they do best – teach – and the industrial park would help fund the requisite STEM and career programs that would ultimately prepare

students for specific careers in the park that is home to Google, DuPont, and Chevron, among others.

The net of school support was cast over a 35-mile radius because labor studies show that 70 percent of the industrial park’s 4,200 workers live within these boundaries. Fry wears multiple hats; he’s been the park’s director of workforce development for four years, and he has served as the director of the MidAmerica STEM Alliance (a nationally recognized STEM Learning Ecosystem) for the two years of its existence. Prior to taking the workforce development position, he spent 13 years directing the Oklahoma State University Institute of Technology at the industrial park. Fry’s unique mix of career experiences made him the perfect driver to traverse these new roads.

## **STEM for K-8**

Not only did the industrial park and its members foot the bill for more than \$2.5 million to set up STEM labs in the largest school districts within the region, but



late in 2018 they awarded a \$25,000 grant to each of the eight smallest, mostly K-8, districts.

“We really believe that planting the seeds as early as possible is important to start creating that awareness but also to make an impact on students’ potential educational pathways,” Fry explained. “I think if you can spark interest in kids with STEM activities and show the relevance of learning, then their whole educational trajectory could be totally different. . . . We made the decision to scrap the plans for that career center and felt like our resources would be better served in the school districts, where the students already are every day.”

If results at Osage Public School are any indication, that approach is already paying dividends. Nicole Hagood coordinates the K-8 school’s STEM initiatives and was excited to use every bit of the school’s \$25,000 grant on Pitsco Education hands-on STEM curriculum and materials. She received professional development from Pitsco and then conducted internal PD for 10 Osage teachers and staff to ensure they could deliver the straw rockets, TETRIX® robotics, and makerspace vehicle activities with their students.

“When selecting products from Pitsco, we knew we wanted to focus on tying what we ordered to concepts that are important to MAIP. Staci was a huge help,” Hagood said of Pitsco Representative Staci Goodson.

“She had created a spreadsheet with the products and how they related to the career opportunities at MAIP. . . . It is important for students to work on team-building skills while being hands on with products that our students might not have been exposed to otherwise.”

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- Scott Fry, education architect

Bluejacket Public School science teacher Shawn Martin was equally excited at the prospects for his middle school students to develop relevant career skills. “I believe robotics excites the students’ imaginations, and I like that it requires them to develop true problem-solving skills. I also really like the solar car and wind generator projects, which are easily tied in with our lessons about energy.”

Fry said Pitsco was an obvious choice for curriculum provider in the latest round of grant funding because of its track record in the STEM education field. “Pitsco has the products, but they also provide the professional development and the technical support, which provides a lot of comfort for our educators. It makes it a much



easier process for them to implement in their classrooms. . . . Pitsco reaches down to the younger grades and has curriculum and products that are relevant to what they're learning and are aligned to standards as well."

### It's about business success

Just as every business must pay attention to the bottom line to remain viable, educators are coming to realize the same thing. Their business just happens to be preparing students for their future careers. That means, for the school districts surrounding the MidAmerica Industrial Park, jobs that range from high tech – such as Google's server farms – to skilled positions such as technicians and manufacturers.

"We tried to be very, very cognizant that we're not doing STEM for the sake of STEM, but we're doing STEM for workforce development and career pathways," Fry said. "And so having that connection to business and industry was always very important to us. . . . We have memorandums of understanding from our employers

and the schools to be active in the processes with the STEM Ecosystem and the activities we offer through it."

Recent Google expansion – erection of a sixth building on its 1,000-acre section of the park – is a shining example of what a STEM Ecosystem's focus on education can yield. "It's one of the largest investments in the United States so far for Google," Fry said. "They've invested millions in the area school districts through their community grants. It's been significant, and it's been a good thing for the industrial park."

MidAmerica STEM Alliance has made a big difference for not only businesses but also area residents who want to have a secure future with promise of good-paying, fulfilling jobs. "Being located in a rural area like we are is a challenge when it comes to workforce," Fry said. "One thing we've seen over the years is that youth in the area seem to be place bound by choice. They want to stay in their community and live and work in their community."