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Our Voice: The STEM difference should get us all thinking about future of education

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Everybody loves a math question first thing in the morning. So here's today's stumper: Washington ranks fourth in technology-based corporations and 46th in producing engineers and scientists; what are we going to do about it?

If you were getting out your slide rule to do some calculations, you can put that away. This is a problem that's going to take a different kind of accounting.

And actually, it's not so much a problem as it is an opportunity.

All parents worry about their children's future. The good news is that there are jobs here in Washington. And good jobs, too.

You can keep the next generation in the state. All you have to do is convince your kids that a career in science or engineering is within their reach ... and get them excited about it.

Several groups are trying to spark that flame, including the Legislature and governor and a group called Washington STEM.

You've probably heard the phrase STEM. It's being thrown around a lot lately. It stands for science, technology, engineering and math.

The idea behind STEM is not so much to produce engineers, (although they are highly sought in the job market), so much as it is to cultivate analytical thinkers in all disciplines.

Delta High is a local example of a STEM school. And the teaching approach varies from the traditional methods.

For one thing, Delta doesn't have much use for text books. Instead, students have access to an abundance of computers and learn how to sift the internet for reliable information.

Another difference is that the teachers don't spend a lot of time answering questions. They reflect the students' questions with more thought-provoking questions and encourage them to discover the answers.

Rather than teachers being the keepers of knowledge and the activity of the day being to transfer knowledge from the teacher through the student to the worksheet, the Delta approach is to teach kids to learn for themselves.

The school mantra is to "Think Differently" -- whether you're thinking about math or English.

The Delta model is an experiment. Much of its success is directly attributed to its business partners, the biggest one being Pacific Northwest National Laboratory.

We are one of the first STEM high schools in the state and Delta's first graduating class will turn their tassels in June. It's been a learning experience -- maybe more so for the community at large than for the students.

And it's paying off.

Schools and businesses around the state are taking notice. Delta High already is enriching education for students around Washington.

Of course, selfishly, our main focus is enriching education for students in the Mid-Columbia.

Delta admits 100 freshmen every year. It's an outstanding opportunity for that handful of kids.

So in addition to the task of getting students to "Think Differently" the STEM goal now also must include getting administrators from area schools, teachers at every level and even the colleges that educate our future teachers to "Think Differently."

Legislation proposed by Gov. Jay Inslee would help. A bill to create the STEM Education Innovation Alliance passed is working its way through the Legislature.

The idea is to combine the efforts of business, labor, nonprofit organizations, school districts and colleges that have already demonstrated leadership and innovation in STEM education.

The aim is to align many disjointed but promising efforts into a single, comprehensive statewide plan that can bring STEM concepts into every classroom.

It's an exciting time to be a student in Washington.

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