

# Education group's focus is technology-related learning

By Brad Durrell  
Editor

Despite being an economic superpower, the United States may be losing its edge when it comes to science and technology.

Recent studies have ranked American students near the bottom in preparedness for these two areas, when compared to other economically vibrant countries.

The Easton Learning Foundation (ELF), a private nonprofit organization that raises money to supplement the town's schools, wants to do something about that at the local level.

Earlier this year, ELF announced the start of the five-year STEM initiative to focus on science, technology, engineering and math.

"The United States is experiencing a high-tech staffing crisis," ELF President Bernadette Waterman wrote in a recent fund-raising letter. "The U.S. is falling behind other countries in graduating students in the technology (STEM) fields."

Waterman and ELF board member Ann Leibell said President Barack Obama also is talking about the need for American students to do better in science and math.

The goal is to prepare young people for careers in high-skill fields.

"This is a national focus," Leibell said. "President Obama has said he wants scientists and mathematicians to be like celebrities in the White House."

One key is exposure to engineering concepts at a young age. Research has shown the earlier students explore these concepts, the more likely they are to pursue related fields as they grow older and continue with their schooling.

If that hasn't happened by high school, most students can't understand what engineers do and believe engineering is only for the "super smart" and for males, according to studies.

## Middle school effort

As part of its STEM initiative, ELF will focus on supporting all Easton schools with grants that promote STEM learning.

The organization is working to raise \$115,000 for a Gateway to Technology pre-engineering program at Helen Keller Middle School.

The program will teach middle-schoolers about technology, design and modeling, automation and robotics, electrons, and flight and space.

Gateway to Technology should be introduced at Keller in the fall of 2010. The ELF funds will be used for teacher curriculum training, purchasing computer equipment and power tools, and renovating rooms to house the program.

"Early exposure is especially important in the middle school, to reach kids before they decide they can't do it," Waterman said.

Engineering-related professions aren't exclusively for the smartest students, according to ELF officials.

Leibell said while all youngsters won't become engineers, exposure to the field at a young age will pique young people's interest in other subjects and teach them important critical skills.

"They are building things, inventing things, working as teams, working with technology," she said of the program's success elsewhere. "They are applying it to solve real-world problems, and this is especially important with the whole green economy."

"They are using math," Waterman said, "without really realizing how complicated it is."

## Impact of donations

ELF normally raises about \$40,000 a year, but raised

much more than that to buy SMART Boards for the Easton schools.

Since being founded almost five years ago, ELF has distributed about \$190,000 in grants. It is an all-volunteer and non-political organization.

During the year-end giving season, ELF officials are hoping people will think about contributing to the organization to support its STEM initiative and other grant programs.

"Your dollars would benefit your town and help kids pursue higher education, then stay in Connecticut and continue our tradition of excellence in education," Waterman said.

Leibell, a past ELF president, said funds donated to ELF "have an immediate impact. It goes right to the schools. You can see the results quickly; all you have to do is talk to a teacher or principal."

Plans are being made to celebrate ELF's fifth birthday in March 2010. The organization also will sponsor another trivia bee fund-raiser on May 20, 2010.

*For more information on ELF, go to [eastonlearning-foundation.org](http://eastonlearning-foundation.org).*