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Aug 22, 2014, 9:25am CDT Updated: Aug 22, 2014, 2:11pm CDT

## Why supporting STEM in Houston makes good business sense



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Houston's philanthropy scene is packed with hundreds of charities vying for the time, talent and dollars of businesses and employees. [Tiphany Burrell](#), community liaison for Young Women's College Preparatory Academy, an all-girls STEM HISD middle and high school, and mother of a YWCPA student, explains why supporting STEM is a decision that not only feels good, but pays off.

**Why support STEM?** Right now, we're behind the game. We haven't invested enough energy in developing the talent pool in the U.S. Many young people have interest in tech and literally grew up with technology in the crib. But traditionally, we wait until college. Kids today are smarter, faster and quicker, and our job is to invest in that. Who's going to take care of me when I'm a senior citizen? Who will we leave our country to?

**Do you see getting involved as altruism or is there some kind of benefit to be had?** It's not just a duty. You get to grow your own workforce. You get to invest and show students what's possible. They're our future workforce and consumer force. If you want their dollars and talent, engage them early. It makes their career decisions easier because loyalties to companies are developed earlier.

Younger kids are exposed to companies that are innovative and giving back. My daughter made a comment, when a senior manager from [Halliburton](#) came to speak to the incoming sixth and ninth graders at YWCPA, "She's gotta be busy. She has a

real job and came here.” In her mind, that put her a notch up in her own self worth, knowing this company thinks we’re important enough. Another example — [Exxon Mobil Corp.](#) is a big volunteer group for YWCPA. For the longest time, my kids wouldn’t let us buy gas anywhere else. It’s brand marketing.

**As the volunteer coordinator for this program, do you have advice for shaping a volunteer program based on today’s workforce?** We launched our mentor program with busy corporate partners in mind and with the hectic lives of students in mind.

Engage people where they’re comfortable. Trying to stretch people is unrealistic and inconsiderate. Be considerate of their priorities — if they’re putting priorities on pause, we need to work with them.

For example, our mentor obligation is a monthly lunch, with adult mentors discussing topics that drive students to success. Or, we have after-school programs ranging from financial literacy courses to fine arts. There’s no task that’s too great or too small.

Plus, the girls’ schedules are full with coursework, and we still want them to enjoy being teenagers.

**What does it take to be a good STEM mentor?** Someone who is caring, compassionate and committed. You don’t have to be an expert on kids. Pay attention. They don’t want empathy, they want someone to understand. Having a mentor is like having a life coach. It’s hard enough for a young woman going into STEM, but a mentor is someone who looks like me, thinks like me and gets my life. They tell me and show me I can.

Sometimes we assume kids who are not disadvantaged have it all together. But think back, what adult made a difference? Be that adult.

Katy Stewart manages Houston Business Journal's social media and audience engagement. [Follow her on Twitter for more.](#)

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