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State pairing girls with mentors to reduce STEM gap

by Alisha Kirby

(Calif.) California will pledge 50,000 professionals to the Million Women Mentors program in an effort to close the persistent gap between boys and girls in science, technology, engineering and math-based education and careers.

The California Commission on the Status of Women and Girls, which has partnered with the University of California, Davis to start a branch of the mentors organization in the Golden State, introduced new mentors this week and provided updates on summer initiatives to teach girls the importance of having a mentor and how to find one.

"It's a matter of having someone that can engage with students both in their personal growth and in their focus in STEM as a sounding board and even as a link to opportunities in some cases," Nancy Kirshner-Rodriguez, executive director of the California Commission on the Status of Women and Girls, said. "We believe that having that mentor-mentee partnership can make a big difference at any age on a person's growth and development."

The federal Office of Science and Technology Policy reports that there could be almost 2.5 million unfilled STEM jobs by 2018, and that large gaps currently remaining between minorities and women and their white male peers indicates a need to tap into those underrepresented populations.

According to the Million Women Mentors' site, only 26 percent of STEM workers are female,

likely in part because many do not pursue careers in the field despite earning a corresponding degree. More than 20 percent of engineering school graduates are women, but just 11 percent of practicing engineers are women. And for every 100 female undergraduate students, 12 graduate as STEM majors—and only three work in such fields 10 years after graduation.

The gap begins in K-12 schools, experts say, and only widens with time. More female students are taking and performing well in precalculus and algebra II, according to national research, but fewer take Advanced Placement tests in such subjects when compared to boys.

Implicit bias shown by teachers, employees, parents and even students themselves is partially responsible in developing that gender gap, according to a 2015 white paper from the Office of Science and Technology Policy. Societal stereotypes propagated over time can embed in people the notion that girls are inherently bad at or uninterested in STEM fields as early as in elementary school.

French researchers from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development also found last year that girls' own self-doubt in these areas may be a factor that drives them to pursue other fields.

Having a mentor could counterbalance those negative influences, Kirshner-Rodriguez said, because students would have guidance and support from someone who understands their point of view that they otherwise may not receive.

The California branch of the Million Women Mentors aims to increase the percentage of middle and high school girls planning to pursue STEM careers, as well as the percentage of young women pursuing STEM degrees and advancing in their field.

"We see statistically that a lot of girls lose interest in these areas in middle school, and I personally believe that there's some significant unconscious bias that leads to girls in some classrooms just not being encouraged to participate or not being seen as naturally interested," Kirshner-Rodriguez said. "There are also not enough young women seeing the depth and breadth of careers available to them."