

VISITATION ACADEMY

Fostering a Culture of Creativity

By Robyn Dexter

In keeping up with the rapid growth in the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) career field, Visitation Academy has jumped on board to get its young ladies enthused about a possible future career in the sciences.

At the start of this school year, the Catholic school opened a Makerspace for its middle schoolers. Middle school principal Jane Eschmann says they were looking for a way to get their girls involved in engineering and design-like projects where they would create solutions for problems.

"Middle school is a great age for getting that growth through hands-on projects," Eschmann says.

She worked with technology coordinator Sue Andrews and came up with a proposal for a space where their students could create, invent and learn. They visited Makerspaces in other schools and attended conferences and sessions about developing a space. They learned that every school that has a Makerspace does it differently, so they had to decide what angle they wanted Visitation's to take.

"We knew we wanted to bring the girls into the space as a part of their classes," Andrews says. "This isn't just going to be for science and math. We're incorporating it into art, language arts and foreign language."

Andrews notes that engineers, for example, don't just think like engineers when they're using their science skills. "It's a part of everything you

do," she says. "We're very excited about that aspect. We're so excited to get the girls in there to design, tinker and play."

From there, the Visitation faculty and staff will continue to develop the design process for the students. Andrews, Eschmann and the Visitation staff are committed to opening young minds to the STEM field, since women are underrepresented in many aspects.

"If we had this space as just a before- or after-school program, not all of our girls would be able to take advantage of it," Eschmann says. "It was extremely important for us to integrate this space into the school day."


She says that while students might not initially think in a STEM-minded way, with the right exposure, they could.

The Makerspace currently features PVC pipe, soldering guns, tool sets, sewing machines, electric circuit boards, 3-D printing and much more. Beginning this school year, sixth graders will begin using the space and have it engrained into their time at Visitation.

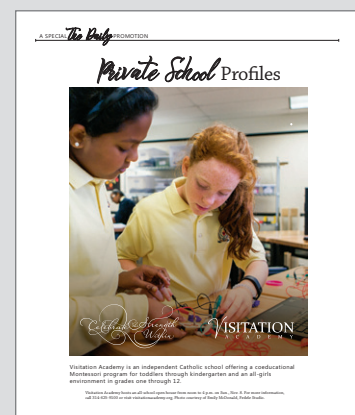
"From the current sixth graders, I think we'll see quite an evolution," Andrews says. "We're just beginning the implementation with 3-D printing and CAD drawing to lay that foundation for the engineering concept. They need to understand that their inventions need to be prototypes."

Feedback from teachers and students so far has been positive, Andrews and Eschmann say.

"Both the students and teachers can't wait

to get in there regularly," Andrews says. "We're providing these middle schoolers with the opportunity to gain self-confidence that could help them go into STEM careers. It's an excellent hook for future academic choices." 

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ON THE COVER: Visitation Academy is an independent Catholic school offering a coeducational Montessori program for toddlers through kindergarten and an all-girls environment in grades one through 12. Visitation Academy hosts an all-school open house from noon to 4 p.m. on Sun., Nov. 8. For more information, call 314-625-9100 or visit visitationacademy.org. Photo courtesy of Emily McDonald, Fedele Studio.