

## SMS Sponsors Program to Encourage Students to Become Women in Charge

The wage discrepancy that exists between men and women workers is currently in the national spotlight. Statistics show that STEM workers (in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math) make higher salaries than other workers. Although women comprise 48% of the workforce in the United States, they make up just 24% of the STEM workers. Because girls often do not know anyone in those nontraditional fields, they do not always consider the options and benefits of pursuing a career in those areas.

Fourteen years ago, Mildred Currie, a science teacher at Moultrie Middle School in Mt. Pleasant, founded a group to address this very issue. She called the group Women-in-Charge: Engineering Women's Lives. The purpose was to increase interest in science and math careers for low and middle income female students. Ms. Currie envisioned a two year science and math course for seventh and eighth grade female students based on research that showed girls need encouragement to pursue math and science coursework and careers.

Deborah Belflower, a current teacher at Seneca Middle School, used to teach at Moultrie Middle School and was a consultant for WIC. After arriving at Seneca Middle School, she could see the same needs for seventh and eighth grade girls in SDOC and decided to establish a sister chapter of the Women-in-Charge program at Moultrie Middle School at SMS. Ms. Belflower and Delaine Childress currently manage the program.

The goals for the program are to increase interest in math and science careers among these girls, to encourage young girls to step out of their comfort zone in meeting new people and experiencing new challenges, to help young women take control of their choices so they can make their dreams a reality, and to break down the mysteries of how to pursue different professional goals.

Women-in-Charge candidates are selected based on grades, test scores and teacher recommendations. Teachers watch for girls who are silent learners in classes, too. Last year, the program consisted of 44 seventh and eighth grade girls. The group works on skills such as speaking out in class and making informed decisions. WIC also provides female speakers who work in non-traditional roles and takes the group to visit local industries.

Last year, one meeting was sponsored by iTron. Students not only benefited from hearing employees in various areas describe their work and areas of expertise but also had the opportunity to learn from their tour guides, two Clemson University co-op students, about how participation in a cooperative education program at a university benefits both educationally and professionally.



WIC visit to iTron in spring 2016

iTron also provided space and time for a roundtable discussion where the students listened to a group of successful, professional women talk about their careers, their educational choices and the obstacles they have experienced and overcome as they pursue STEM careers.

WIC began its second year this fall by featuring a handful of accomplished female Clemson University upperclassmen who are pursuing degrees and careers in the sciences. The Clemson students met with the school's Women in Charge (WIC) group for a discussion roundtable.



The group broke into small question and answer groups to discuss educational experiences, post-graduate plans and the paths the students had taken to find their places in fields usually dominated by men.



The Clemson students who participated were Emily McMacken, a Genetics and Biochemistry major who plans to become a secondary science teacher; Lauren Pruett, a Bioengineering major with plans to pursue research after obtaining a Ph.D.; Sarah Jenkins, a Genetics and Biochemistry major who wishes to attend medical school; and Kathleen Nicholson, a Genetics major planning to have a career in Veterinary Medicine/Research. Deborah Belflower is shown here with the students.

“We are always on the lookout for speaker and field trip opportunities,” said Ms. Belflower. “We are scheduled to take a trip to visit Epcot and Kennedy Space Center in the spring and will take the girls to Clemson to take the biology merit exam in April.”

SDOC is very proud to have dedicated and passionate teachers, like Ms. Belflower and Ms. Childress, who identify needs and address them by sponsoring student groups such as WIC. Our charge as a school district is to make sure students are prepared for the future. Making students aware of opportunities and non-traditional roles is a large part of that. Well done!