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Facebook competition highlights importance of parent engagement

Posted on [August 7, 2019](#) by [Nebraska Children](#) — [Leave a comment](#)

Earlier this spring, a handful of Omaha middle schoolers earned the opportunity to travel to California to attend Facebook’s Engineer for the Week Achievement Summit at the company’s headquarters. The team of three students came from the Boys & Girls Club Panther Pack afterschool program at Morton Middle School, one of 31 afterschool and summer programs in Omaha facilitated by Collective for Youth, a Beyond School Bells partner. For 13-year-old Ajzeona McKizzie and her mom Josephine, the trip was life-changing.

Learning by doing

Engineer for the Week is an immersive program that introduces students to the fast-paced world of engineering. Teams participate in building prototypes from design through the iteration of a final product. To qualify for the Achievement Summit, Ajzeona and her teammates worked hard with Charles

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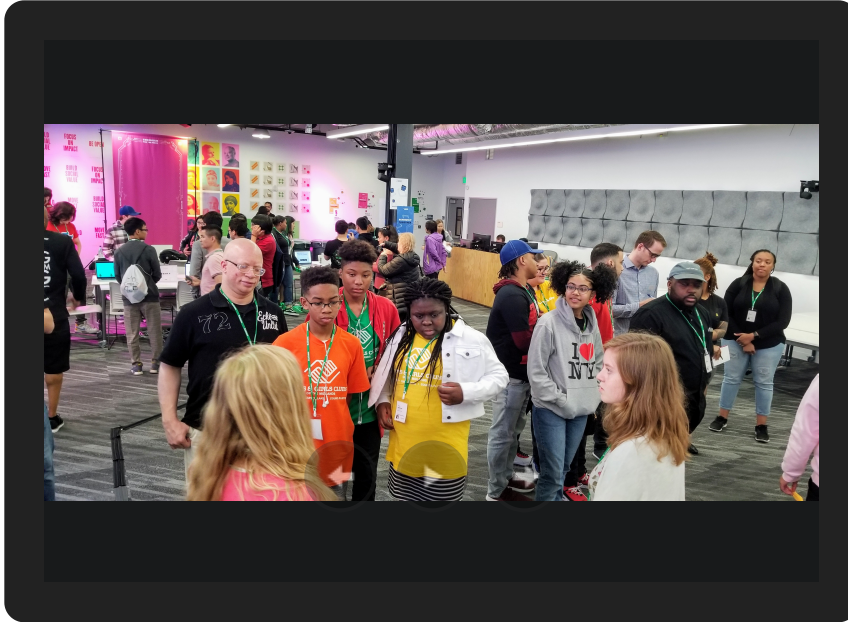
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Parks III of cp3o, a local partner that teaches technology and media skills to students in afterschool programs. Together, they designed a chat bot that could help support students emotionally and offer information on bullying and other sensitive topics. Throughout the process, the students were able to meet virtually each week with a Facebook engineer. Their hard work paid off, and they were offered a spot at the Achievement Summit.



The three students got to travel to California with their sponsors, which included Ajeona's mom Josephine, who initially wasn't sure about whether to let Ajeona participate in the afterschool club. "I always thought it was too late for kids to be in school, but she was really excited about it and begged me to let her do it," Josephine says. "Now I know it's a blessed opportunity for our children. They can advance a lot from these afterschool programs, and can even win scholarships."

During the Achievement Summit, Ajeona and her teammates got the opportunity to create a game, present it to Facebook engineers, talk through changes, and work collaboratively with other teams. The game the team presented showcased the youngsters' passion for the environment. "We made Trashketball, a game where you try to make a basket and the more trash you get in the basket, the more animals you save," Ajeona says. "I found out how many animals die from all the trash in the ocean and in the streets, so I thought maybe we should find ways to pick up for them."

Building stronger parent support systems

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Gwyn Williams, Program Director at Collective for Youth in Omaha, loved getting to see Ajzeona and her teammates in action. She also loved seeing Josephine's response to this opportunity. "I don't think adults realize how smart kids are," she says. "I think we always put them in a box and say well, they can't do this because they're only X age, but that's our issue, not their issue! We as adults need to just let the kids do what they can do and be as creative as possible and see where they can go. Let's give them every opportunity and see what they can do with it." The opportunity for Josephine to travel with the group also gave her the chance to see her daughter in a new light.

"Every day I want more for me and my kids, so with this experience, it's opening big doors for Ajzeona and the whole family," Josephine says. "Other people are welcome to understand that if you are overprotective like I was, it's OK to meet new people and let other people interact with your children. Share your kids with the world, especially when they have great abilities. Ajzeona's positivity can help someone else's child, or even another adult, because she's such a positive person."

Increasingly, STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) learning advocates are seeing the importance of engaging parents in their children's STEM Learning. STEMNext, another Beyond School Bells partner, has made engaging parents in out-of-school time STEM learning a key programming priority in their national investment strategy to help develop a STEM-ready future workforce. In Nebraska, Beyond School Bells is working with Nebraska Extension to develop a series of take-home STEM learning backpacks full of activities that parents and children participating in the Nebraska Statewide Family Engagement Center program, a national initiative housed at Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, can take home and work on together to help build their identity as STEM learners.

It was just these types of parent/child relationships that were strengthened by Ajzeona's trip to Facebook — and by her regular participation in afterschool programs back at Panther Pack. "The afterschool program really allows parents to see their children in a different light and help them make those connections and really do right by our kids," Gwyn says. "It shows that parents and children can work together to create opportunities learning that will help shape a brighter future."

Josephine agrees. “Regardless of what type of childhood I had growing up, I try to give them a better childhood than myself,” she says. “We’re pretty strong on school in our family, so we encourage Ajzeona, and she’s gotten a lot of opportunities from going to these afterschool programs.” Josephine is leaning in on this work, encouraging Ajzeona to continue participating in afterschool programs and to take more challenging courses during the regular school day so she can be on track to continue developing her STEM skills.

Thinking of the future

Afterschool programs like Panther Pack are all about introducing kids to the many paths they can take as they grow older and make their way through school — especially opportunities for STEM careers. According to Gwyn, Ajzeona’s friendliness and willingness to learn could take her really far in life. “Ajzeona could be a role model for the rest of her siblings and her cousins — they see her and they see a way through to something bigger and better, and then they’ll want to try harder in school,” she says.

From her time in the Panther Pack program, Ajzeona is learning a lot about who she is, what she’s capable of, and what she wants to do in the future. “I want to study being a doctor or nurse in college,” she says. “I want to help people in need and find the things that most people wouldn’t go do, and probably try to do them.”

To Gwyn, seeing Ajzeona’s success makes her even more passionate about the work Collective for Youth and afterschool programs are doing in Omaha and beyond. It also reinforced the understanding the roles that adults, and perhaps most importantly parents and other primary caregivers, can play in supporting their children’s growth and development. “We really need to stop telling kids that we don’t think they’re ready for something, and just open up the floodgates and try as many things as possible,” Gwyn says.

For more information on afterschool opportunities in your area, visit beyondschoolbells.org today.



About Nebraska Children

Nebraska Children's mission is to maximize the potential of Nebraska's children, youth,

and families through collaboration and community-centered impact.

◀ PDG Needs Assessment Update

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