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# Kirk Riley: We live for the 'Aha!' moments

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Written by **Kirk Riley** is executive director of the Information Technology Empowerment Center.

Few things in life are as rewarding as seeing students faces light up as they discover the world around them. But what if they could also help design and build that world? What if they can create something new, entirely the product of their ideas and imagination? That's where ITEC comes in.

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At the Information Technology Empowerment Center we are dedicated to creating these moments of design and discovery, with a special focus on serving at-risk youth. We bring hands-on learning programs in science-related content to local area students after school and in the summers, in locations throughout the Lansing community.

Since our creation in 2008, ITEC has aimed to ignite natural curiosity

in a space where it is safe to explore, make mistakes, and learn without the pressure of tests, quizzes and report cards.

Bringing science teaching and methods into an environment outside the classroom can be a fun, engaging way for youth to explore and develop enthusiasm for complex learning. We strive to show students that science is a process that incorporates discovery, problem solving, and creativity.

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At ITEC, we set the table for our students to explore. There is no answer key. Instead, our students build and program robots while working together in teams, collaborating and competing at the same time. Others create movies, learning how to write a script and direct, film, and edit their own movies. They design and program their own video games.

Our students develop confidence in their ability to learn coupled with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed.

We especially impact student attitudes and motivation toward science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) classes and



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careers, with 82 percent saying they are interested in STEM classes after ITEC, compared to 55 percent before. They show gains in math proficiency through our after-school iMath program, which is held in Lansing's fourth through sixth grade schools.

Interactive and fun learning opportunities in STEM areas encourage students to explore and achieve goals they might not necessarily have thought possible. By developing a more positive attitude toward computers, science and math they can gain confidence and see the benefits of taking high school classes in STEM fields, and even pursuing a career in science, technology, math or engineering. ITEC is working to put these students on a trajectory for academic and career success.

Now, more than ever, employers are looking for employees who have a combination of technical, problem solving and people skills. There are currently over 1,000 jobs available in the Lansing area that require these skills and the numbers are expected to continue to grow. With our variety of programs and hands on approach, ITEC is helping to grow Lansing's future scientists, engineers, mathematicians, computer programs, researchers and analysts.

And those "Aha!" moments? They occur when middle school students working together command their robot to perform a "360." Or when one of them programs their own cartoon, complete with dancing cats. Or when the app designed by a teenager tells him or her to stop shaking their smart phone.

ITEC helps prepare kids for a successful future, while meeting employers' needs for a prepared and skills workforce. We see it one "Aha!" moment at a time. Come join us in this work!

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