

ECISD students hear about stem cell research opportunity

By Ruth Campbell rcampbell@oaoa.com | Posted: Friday, January 25, 2019 1:30 pm

About 75 students interested in pursuing careers in the health sciences heard a presentation about getting involved in stem cell research as part of a collaboration between Ector County Independent School District and Tulane University School of Medicine.

Recently, career and technical education health science teachers Holley Davilla, Shonda Owen, Christina Portillo and Tenille Aranda went on the journey to New Orleans, along with Chief Innovation Officer Jason Osborne and Science Coordinator Ashley Osborne. Teachers from Justin ISD joined them.

The educators learned about cell biology, microscopy and bioengineering. On Thursday in the lecture hall at George H.W. Bush New Tech Odessa, they presented the chance for students to take part in the research and the possibility of offering a capstone class.

Executive Director of Career and Technical Education Carla Byrne said there are 750-plus students in the health sciences career pathway. One the aspects of Thursday's presentation was gauging student interest in pursuing stem cell research.

ECSID student researchers will help by analyzing data and contributing to research from stem cell growth, differentiation and communication, as well as bioengineering.

Any scientifically significant contribution to the research will be credited and acknowledged in future research journal publications, a brochure from the gathering said.

"We're looking at the opportunity to add this to our career pathway as a capstone to a four-year pathway so students can take this their senior year," Byrne said. "We're looking at partnering this course with an existing practicum so that our kids can, instead of going into CNA, or instead of going into EMT, or pharmacy technician, they would have this opportunity for their practicum to be all about stem cell research."

"We are really excited. It's just another route for them to take and nothing that anybody has really seen for high schoolers," Byrne added.

She said the teachers who went on the trip, who were all respiratory therapists, brought the idea for a class to her.



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ECISD Chief Innovation Officer Jason Osborne talks to students at George H.W. Bush New Tech Odessa Thursday about opportunities to participate in stem cell research with Tulane University School of Medicine.

“It gave me goosies,” Byrne said. I was pumped. That’s what we’re going to do is make it a class.”

Ashley Osborne has an idea to use it for International Baccalaureate students.

“They have a group project that they do. This would be a great opportunity for them to use Project Stem Cell as that culminating project that they would do with IB. One of the great things about partnership with Tulane University School of Medicine is that they are so willing to alter the science that we’re looking at, or potentially partner with us on different science projects,” she said.

Jason Osborne said officials are still trying to figure out how to roll it out.

“We had a bunch of kids that were interested in hopping on it right now and getting involved now, especially some of the seniors because they want to have that experience leaving here. So we’re going to talk about ways of getting them on board, getting that software and getting the images and have them go through that process and do as much as possible. They can even take it home. It’s portable science. They can take it home and do image analysis, as well, and they can continue some of this data processing even after they graduate here. We really want to have this open-ended and the possibilities are kind of endless,” Osborne said.

Alyssa Baiza, a sophomore at Permian High School, Alyssa Lewis, a sophomore at Odessa High School, and Mia Castillo, a senior at OHS, said they were excited about the opportunity.

“I’m really excited for this. We’re going to save people with this ...,” Baiza said.

In the future, this could mean that people waiting for organs could get them sooner instead of having to wait for years.

Lewis said the presentation was amazing for her.

“I’ve always wanted to be in the medical field. It’s kind of like that window. One door closes and two windows open. It’s like looking into a whole brand new future for me. And then because I want to go down the medical field path, it’s like wait, maybe this is my sign that I’ve been asking for for years,” Lewis added.

She said it’s exciting to think she can be part of efforts to save someone else’s life.

“... It gets me all worked up. I’m ready to put on my gloves and go now,” Lewis said.

Castillo said she has younger siblings who are also going into the medical field, so this research will expand their knowledge.

Owen and Portillo are two of the teachers who went to Tulane. Both teach medical terminology and world health research.

“It’s eye-opening even coming from the medical field of what technology is doing and where the advancements are going in the future,” Owen said.

She added that they are “super excited” to be able to expose their students to this chance.

Portillo said she wished there were avenues like this when she was a student.

“It opens doors. It opens eyes. They don’t know about some of the areas and this gives them a chance to,” Portillo said.