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**YouthForce NOLA Awarded \$4 Million Grant to
Prepare Students for Careers in Computer Science and STEM**

New Orleans (Dec. 21, 2020) – YouthForce NOLA has been awarded a nearly \$4 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to prepare New Orleans public high school students for careers in computer science and the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) industries.

“Training in high school helps level the playing field and create more equitable outcomes for our public school students. It allows young people from economically disadvantaged households to consider, early on, the careers they might like to pursue, and it gives them a roadmap and access to the tools they need to succeed,” said Cate Swinburn, the president of YouthForce NOLA, a nonprofit that partners with schools, employers, training providers, and community organizations to open doors to economic opportunity for New Orleans public school students.

The new grant program will complement and strengthen YouthForceNOLA’s existing work to provide students with the skills, networks, and experiences needed to pursue high-wage careers in the region’s fastest-growing industries.

Over the next ten years, the Greater New Orleans economy will need to fill 78,000 STEM jobs in skilled trades, applied sciences, and technology, according to GNO, Inc. To help prepare young people for these jobs, the new federally-funded program will allow students to participate in computer science courses during the school day that are offered by YouthForce NOLA’s training provider partners: Operation Spark and Spark Mindset. Students in these courses will earn credits toward Industry Based Credentials (IBCs), which are certifications that confirm individuals have mastered the critical skills necessary to be effective employees.

YouthForce and partners will integrate soft skills throughout the computer science courses to empower students with the knowledge, confidence, agency, network and self-advocacy skills needed to succeed academically and professionally. They will also pair students with industry mentors and provide case management services with on-staff social workers. YouthForce will further provide students with paid internships and full-time jobs through its network of more than 250 employer partners.

Students will be prepared for full-time computer science employment immediately out of our program,” said John Fraboni, executive director of Operation Spark. “Young people completing our courses are earning an average starting salary at \$60,000, which is well above the median income. And there are plenty of opportunities for advancement.”

Research confirms the impact of career-connected learning and employment on a range of youth outcomes – from high school graduation and college-going rates to employment outcomes. The integration of soft skills training could even further improve outcomes, says Lawrence Wagner, executive director of Spark Mindset.

“Soft skills integration with computer science will boost students' self confidence and help them excel in professional settings. They will be a step ahead even before they've graduated high school,” he said.

According to Swinburn, “this grant isn't just great news for our young people, it's a tangible endorsement of the skill sets we're providing and a far-sighted investment that will provide big returns for the New Orleans residents, businesses and the community at large going forward.”

The Federal funding comes from the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program and totals \$3,996,263, representing some 90 percent of the cost of the program. YouthForceNOLA, with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and other philanthropic partners, will finance \$473,044, which is approximately ten percent of the program.

About YouthForce NOLA

YouthForce NOLA is an education, business, and civic collaborative that builds bridges between school and work. Through our network of partner schools, employers, training providers, and community organizations, YouthForce is opening more doors to economic opportunity for New Orleans students. Its vision is that New Orleans public school graduates will thrive economically

as a result of being the most sought-after talent for hiring and advancement in our region's high-wage career pathways.

More at YouthForceNOLA.org.

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