**Increasing Enrollment in a STEM-Focused Enriched Program**

For the past nine years I have been deeply involved in the Math Science and Technology (MaST) program at my school. Our school is 70% male, we weren’t surprised that in our first few years we only had 23-32% female students entering the program. When this dropped to 18% in our fifth year we made some very specific changes and as a result 46% of our grade nine class this year is female.

Here is how it happened. We followed the example of Physics Education Research and first listened to the students. We got all the female students together after-school (providing free pizza!) and had them fill out surveys and then discuss questions in small and large groups.

Two big changes came out of this;

1. In grade nine the students had to choose between drama and music. However, half of the girls who chose to come said that they would have chosen art! How many stayed away for this reason. We now offer art as an option and incorporate many more opportunities in the science, tech and math courses to incorporate art.
2. They said that many girls are strongly influenced by their friends and are worried about appearing to be a nerdy. They felt that they could help counter this influence by visiting their home schools to talk to the grade 7 and 8 girls. We now make sure that half of our assistants during MaST events are girls. As an extra benefit, the senior girls have become proud of their place in the program and their role in changing one small part of the world for the better.

In the spring we run a Mini-Skills Competition when eight of our feeder schools are invited to send selected grade-7 students for the day. I run an Engineering Design Competition and the first year I did this, all of the competitors were male! Since then, I have made it a female-only competition. This has been hugely successful! (The dip in the eighth year occurred following the spring when I was not able to run the competition.) As well as influencing the students, it influenced their teachers. They walked into a room and saw twenty-four girls deeply involved in drilling, sanding, talking, decorating and competing. This inspired them to encourage specific female students that they apply to the MaST program. Research has shown that girls tend to under-rate their abilities in the STEM skills and one teacher can have a huge effect.

What I have learnt, is that it is still not a gender-neutral world with regards to girls and science. We all need to explore all angles.