

# New mentoring program introduces students to building careers

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MANKATO — High school students stepped between ice puddles on the concrete floor of the future Eide Bailly Center Tuesday afternoon.

“The rain on Sunday did us no favors,” said project superintendent Chris Holtz during a tour of what will become a downtown Mankato office tower.

Frigid temperatures and walloping winds have made construction more challenging, but Holtz told the students solving those challenges also strengthens the camaraderie of the construction workers.

The student guests are considering careers related to construction, architecture and engineering.

A new area chapter of a national mentoring program is giving them a taste of what their futures could look like.

Volunteers are leading the southern Minnesota chapter of the ACE Mentor Program.

ACE stands for Architecture, Construction and Engineering. The organization aims to introduce high school students to the diverse career opportunities in those fields and to increase the diversity of those who are entering those fields.

“We're creating a diverse, better prepared workforce for the industry,” said Leah Roue, founder of the new chapter.

A construction management professor at Minnesota State University, Roue served as a mentor in the Twin Cities chapter and was inspired to bring it to southern Minnesota.

The new chapter launched its first after-school program last month in partnership with Mankato Area Public Schools Community Education and Recreation.

Every Tuesday for 15 weeks, students from multiple Mankato high schools meet at the Lincoln Community Center to learn from volunteer mentors who are industry professionals.

The first few weeks provided an introduction to the fields.

Loyola High School junior Desi Aguillon said she was surprised to learn “how many different people” from multiple companies are involved in the process of designing and constructing a building.

Now the students are getting a more hands-on taste of the industry through field trips.

Knutson Construction project engineer Collin Bennett is working on the the Eide Bailly Center and organized the tour. The recent MSU graduate is an ACE mentor and said he focuses on showcasing the entry-level opportunities in construction.

Tanner Stier, a junior at West High School, said his favorite part of the trip was seeing the building blueprints. He is leaning toward a career in architecture.

Fellow West junior Josh Benson is interested in engineering and said he is most excited for later Tuesday meetings when the students will get to try their hand at designing a city park. They will work together and with mentors to develop a mock plan for a real parcel of land in the city of Mankato and will submit their design into the program's national competition.

The competition is one of the opportunities for participants to earn college scholarships.

Donors are funding local scholarships and program costs, Roue said.

A volunteer board leads the southern Minnesota chapter and Roue said they hope to repeat the program at least annually in Mankato and to expand to other communities. They are looking for industry sponsors and volunteer mentors.

For more information go to [www.acementor.org/affiliates/minnesota/southern](http://www.acementor.org/affiliates/minnesota/southern) or [www.facebook.com/aceofsm](http://www.facebook.com/aceofsm).