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Program offers girls equation for success in science

■ Hands-on Techbridge designed to draw more females to field

By Laura Casey

STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND — Five girls stood in a semi-circle around Adhamina Rodriguez, a project engineer with construction company Swinerton Inc., and tapped on 11 types of recycled construction materials to try to guess their composition.

"I think this is cork," one girl announced as she passed it to another in the engi-

neering room of Oakland Technical High School on Monday afternoon.

About 15 high school girls stay after class for two hours every week to learn about science through the school's Techbridge program, a project hosted by the Chabot Space and Science Center. Techbridge is designed to spark girls' interest in science through hands-on projects.

Jennifer Hopkirk, a senior, said it works.

"I was able to do a lot of stuff that I couldn't do at home," Hopkirk said. Things like building robots, soldering and learning

about electronics.

"Now I can fix all the computers in the house, and my dad has no idea what's going on," she said.

Rodriguez was one of four women brought to the after-school program to show the girls that jobs in the mathematics and science fields can be fun.

"It is really rewarding when you do something and in a few months you have a new building," said Rodriguez, the first female project manager in her department.

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"There are good work opportunities in the field of science and engineering."

Techbridge started five years ago with a National Science Foundation grant. It continues today, reaching about 250 girls in schools across the East Bay through grants from the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, Microsoft and other companies.

Techbridge offers girls what public schools often do not have the time or money to offer — project-based learning, summer programs, career counseling and role-model visits.

Luci Morris-Tyndall, Swinerton senior vice president and chief information officer, told the girls her school guidance counselor told her she could not go into the math and science fields even though she scored high on aptitude tests. She did not go to college right away, either, even though she had the mind for it.

"No one told us there was a benefit to going to college," she said.

Morris-Tyndall says it is essential for young women to learn that it is OK to like science and math and that going into the field can be lucrative.

"Anything we can do to keep them interested and show them it is fun and exciting stuff is good for all of us," she said.

Monday's talk focused primarily on recycled and reusable materials in constructing "green" buildings. The speakers focused on green building materials, solar energy and green window treatments.

"All of our girls always talk about wanting to make a positive impact in the environment," Techbridge project director Linda Kekelis said. "They can make that connection through this talk."