

**Club Name:** Boys & Girls Club of Fitchburg & Leominster, Mass.

[bgfl.org](https://bgcfl.org/)

About 10 years ago, this Club organization in north central Massachusetts redefined itself as a STEAM out-of-school-time program. Seeing that local schools were constrained by limited resources, the Club committed to immersing young people in rich STEM and arts experiences. The Club infuses science, technology, engineering, the arts and mathematics into all of its year-round programming for youth ages 8 to 18. It also serves children ages 5 to 7 during the summer.

Club staff use existing programs like First Robotics and Girls Who Code to expose members to all of the STEAM career pathways and opportunities that are available to them. Everything they do at the Club is related to how it can be used in the world of work. Club staff regularly invite guest speakers to talk with members about their STEAM-related professions, either in person or via video chats. To increase members' exposure to different careers, Club staff encourage guest speakers to talk with members about the diversity of jobs within their organization, for example, a hospital has building maintenance, food preparation and IT staff, as well as different healthcare professionals. Staff take members on frequent field trips to technical schools, community colleges and businesses to explore trades, biotech, 3D printing, coding, game design, and robotic-controlled farming. Staff prepare members for these field trips, setting expectations for their behavior and having them research the college, technical school or business they are visiting so they can ask relevant questions about available jobs, their typical salaries, and the educational requirements for those jobs.

"We want to expose members to the possibility of having careers in a field they may not have considered. Many youth tend to put themselves in boxes. They may think their opportunities are limited. But with what they are exposed to at the Club, they see many more opportunities. The outcomes we want for them is that they move forward and take the proper steps to secure these jobs, like earning certifications. We help them figure out what path they need to take to achieve their goals and how they should get started," said Teen Center Director Jon Blodgett.

To extend its reach, the organization also puts on special community events to expose many more youth to STEAM experiences. Each year, it collaborates with a statewide STEM network that provides funding and volunteers, and local companies in STEM industries like Oracle and Raytheon, to host the Central Massachusetts Science Festival, a free hands-on, fun event for youth and adults. It also holds an annual Reality Fair, in which youth choose professions, make a budget based on the typical pay for that profession, and practice making buying decisions while staying within their means.

Club CEO Donata Martin strongly recommends joining the local Chamber of Commerce as a critical workforce readiness partnership- and network-building strategy. Martin regularly asks her fellow chamber members for help in finding guest speakers, program volunteers, hosting workplace field trips, and organizing community outreach events such as job fairs. "Chamber members can make an initial call for a Club organization and help set up visits and field trips. The Chambers are into it because they hear from employers that have unfilled positions. You'd be surprised how much support you can get from the business community if you just ask. Local businesses are keenly interested in helping to develop the workforce of tomorrow," Martin said.

The Club’s leaders have built strong public and private partnerships and diverse funding streams to support not just career exploration, but also employability skill development and in- and out-of-Club work experience for young people. For example, the Club has secured state and federal government funding to help subsidize its robotics program for teens and its Computer-Aided Design (CAD) program for middle schoolers, and partners with local technical schools to ensure the programs provide robust, up-to-date instruction and access to the right equipment. The Club uses Boys & Girls Clubs of America’s CareerLaunch program to help its teens identify their career interests, research career paths and build basic employability skills. But now, after securing a two-year grant from the National Science Foundation, the Club is adapting CareerLaunch to focus on preparing for STEAM careers. Its goals include providing youth with mentors and incentives for internships and field experience.

The Club offers the Counselor in Training (CIT) program for 14-year-old youth in the summer. They make their own schedules, choose the Club activities they want to work in, participate in CareerLaunch sessions once per week, and earn a small stipend when they complete the program. CIT and CareerLaunch completion are pre-requisites for older teens to become paid Junior Staff. They have set schedules and assignments during school-year or summer programming. The Club has secured grant funding from the state Youth Works program, the local district attorney’s office and a group of banks to underwrite these in-Club job placements. As an example of out-of-Club placements, the Club has partnered with the local Community Action Program, which is federally funded, to train and certify Club teens to provide Volunteer Income Tax Assistance to community residents. The Club partners with other local employers to create STEAM-related job placements for young people, such as a waste water treatment plant, art museum, newspaper, housing office, Head Start program and a hospital.

The Club also encourages teen entrepreneurship. A group of teens interested in having their own business built an apparel screen-printing enterprise. The Club partnered with the local Community Development Corporation and Chamber of Commerce members to coach teens on how to develop a business plan, find prospective investors and make a pitch. The teens generated $20,000 to start their business, called BGCPrint, established a space, installed a sign and have a Facebook page. Each week, Club staff transport teens across town, and they screen print T-shirts for the Club and other customers.