Igniting the Spark of STEM Learning: How Driving Possibilities is Inspiring Students in Arizona, North Carolina, Georgia and Mississippi

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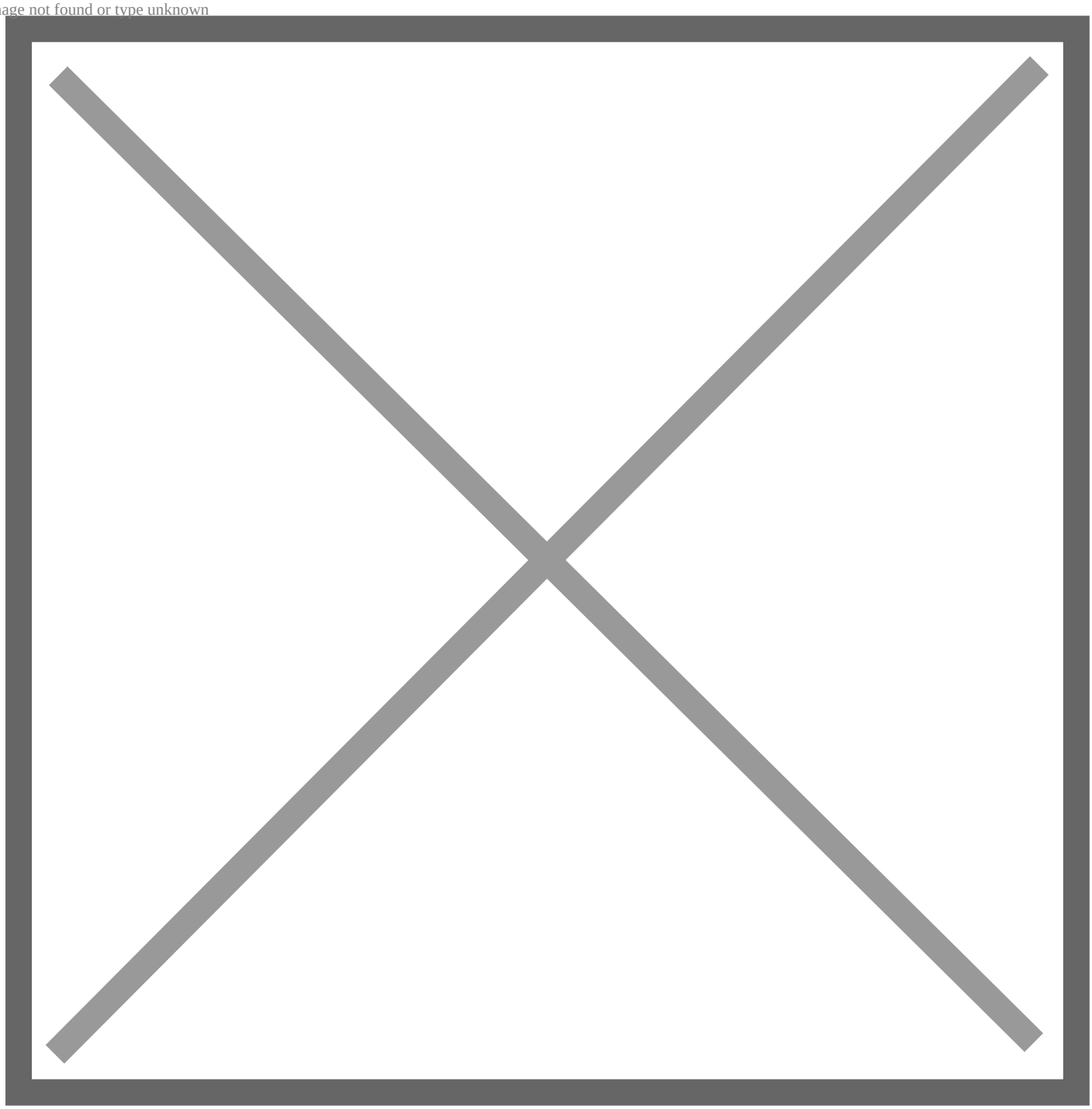


Imagine if every day at school, students could expand their sense of what's possible for their futures, show confidence and excitement for the new skills they are building, and prepare to pursue the career opportunities of tomorrow.

Additionally, imagine if every student were surrounded by the supports they need to make sure nothing prevents them from learning.

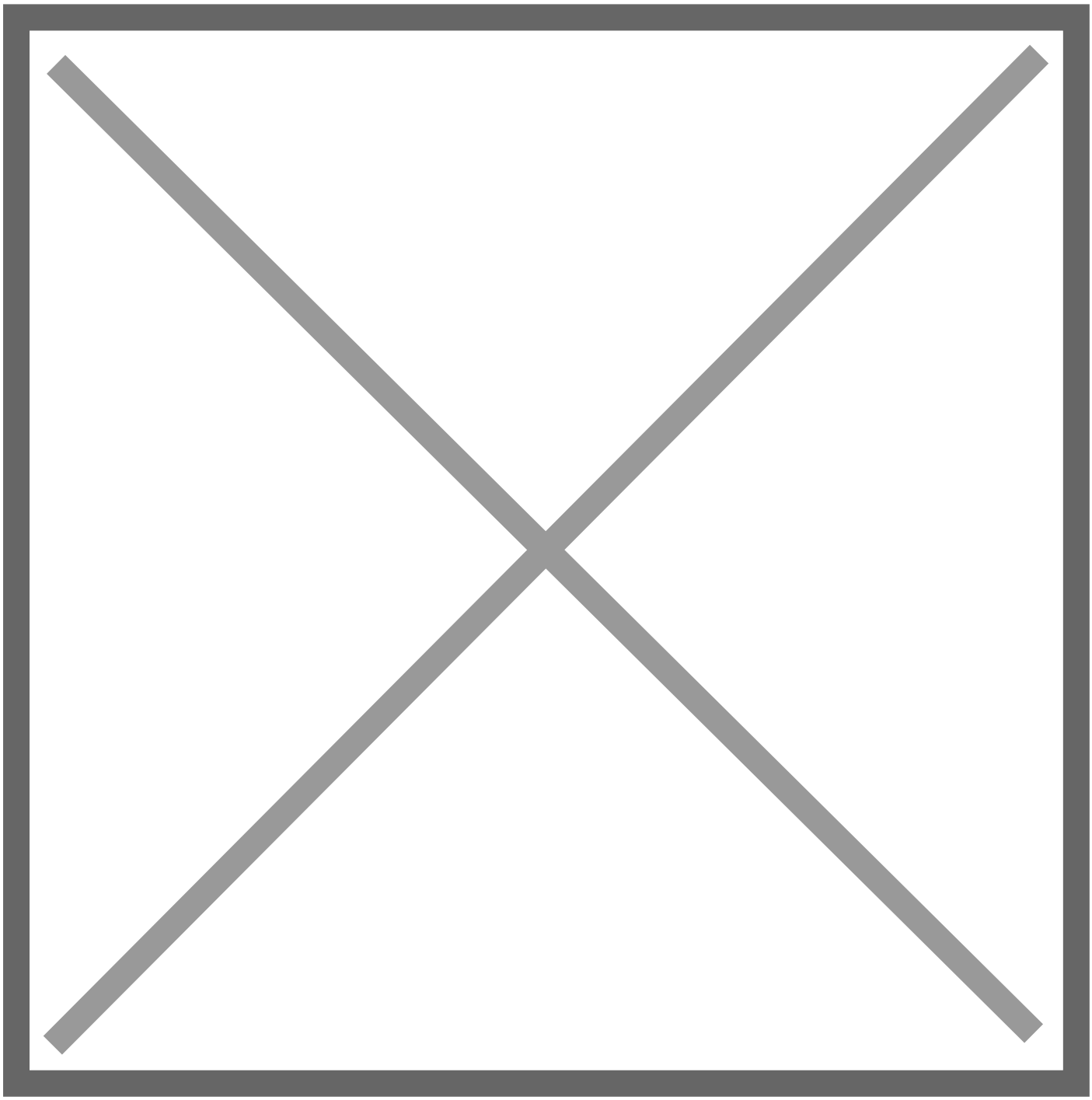
This is the vision that's currently being activated across the nation through the Toyota USA Foundation's Driving Possibilities, Toyota's signature STEM education and community engagement initiative funded in part by Toyota Motor North America (TMNA) and Toyota Financial Services (TFS).

Inspired by a model developed at the West Dallas STEM School, Driving Possibilities is now up and running in eight additional U.S. locations where Toyota has facilities. The effort builds on decades of collaboration between Toyota and these communities.

All Driving Possibilities locations have similar goals, but when it comes to accelerating effective STEM learning and strengthening tomorrow's workforce, there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

At each site, Toyota USA Foundation works closely with local school districts, institutions of higher learning and nonprofit organizations to tailor Driving Possibilities to the unique attributes and aspirations of the communities served.

The Foundation was excited to launch four new Driving Possibilities locations in 2024: Chandler, Arizona; Greensboro, North Carolina; Atlanta, Georgia; and Blue Springs, Mississippi. Read on to discover the innovative and inspiring work underway in these communities!



Driving Excitement for STEM Careers

In Arizona, the Driving Possibilities team learned that lack of awareness was a key reason why many students in the Chandler Unified and Tempe Elementary school districts were not pursuing careers in STEM industries. “Students either had inconsistent STEM learning experiences, or they didn’t know what STEM is and what types of careers are available to them,” explains Jeannie Bailey, Driving Possibilities program manager.

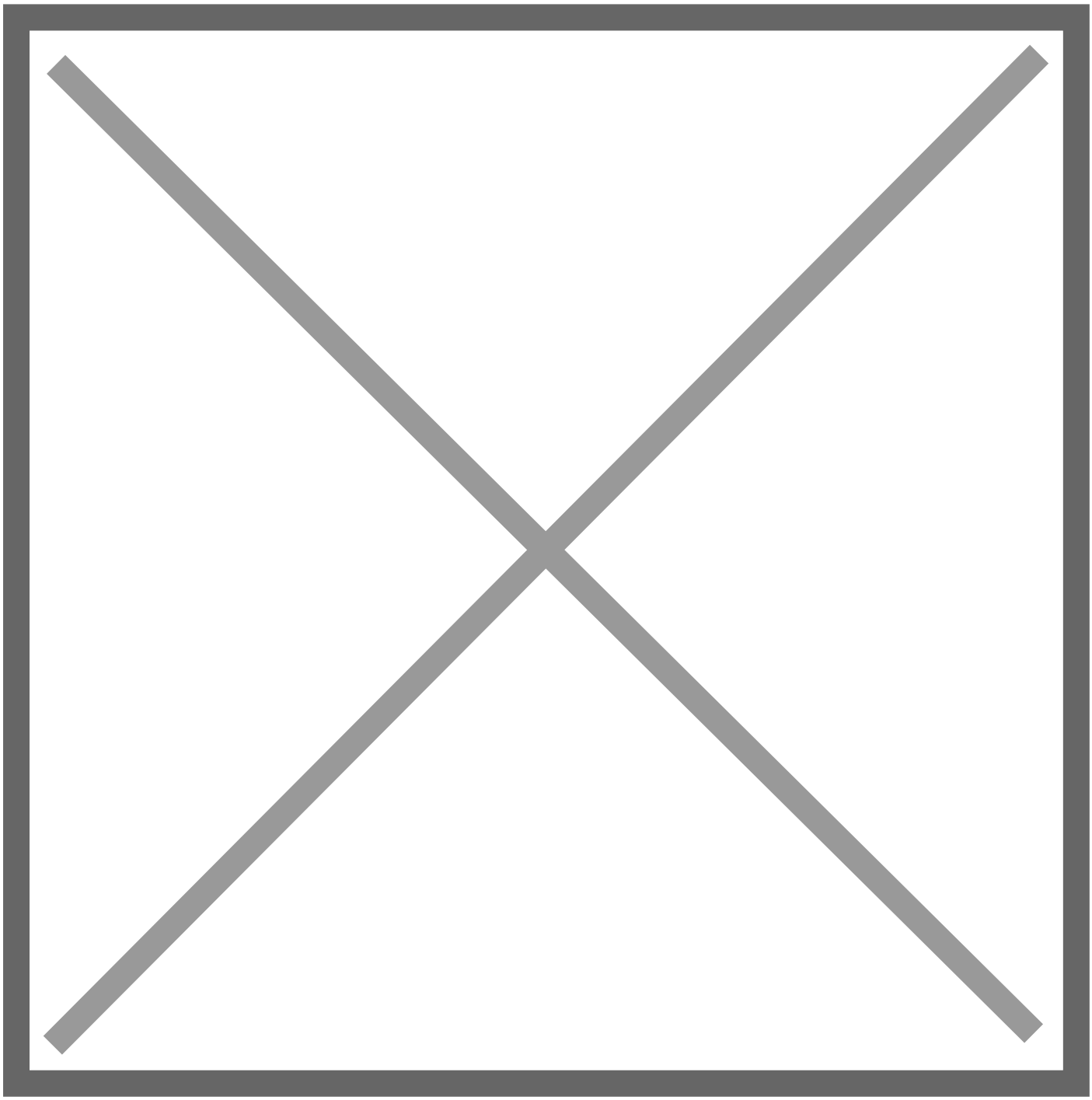
Additionally, teachers in both districts were spending significant amounts of classroom time addressing students’ basic needs rather than building foundational skills. Some schools lacked access to supportive services for

students; others weren’t fully utilizing available services because of coordination challenges.

To help students see a future for themselves in the careers of tomorrow, Driving Possibilities is collaborating with Arizona partner schools to integrate STEM-based lessons, projects, and programs into the existing curricula. The program is also funding professional development for teachers, who play an essential role in guiding students’ exploration and curiosity.

To address basic needs and ensure classroom time can be focused on learning, Driving Possibilities teamed up with local nonprofits to establish community resource centers on school campuses. Resource centers make it possible for students and families to access things like food, vision screenings and therapy appointments, right within the walls of their school. Many services are available during and after school hours, and some also on weekends.

Another exciting highlight is the show of support from Arizona team members, who built and delivered over two thousand STEM kits to local students—demonstrating that Driving Possibilities is truly an all-hands effort.

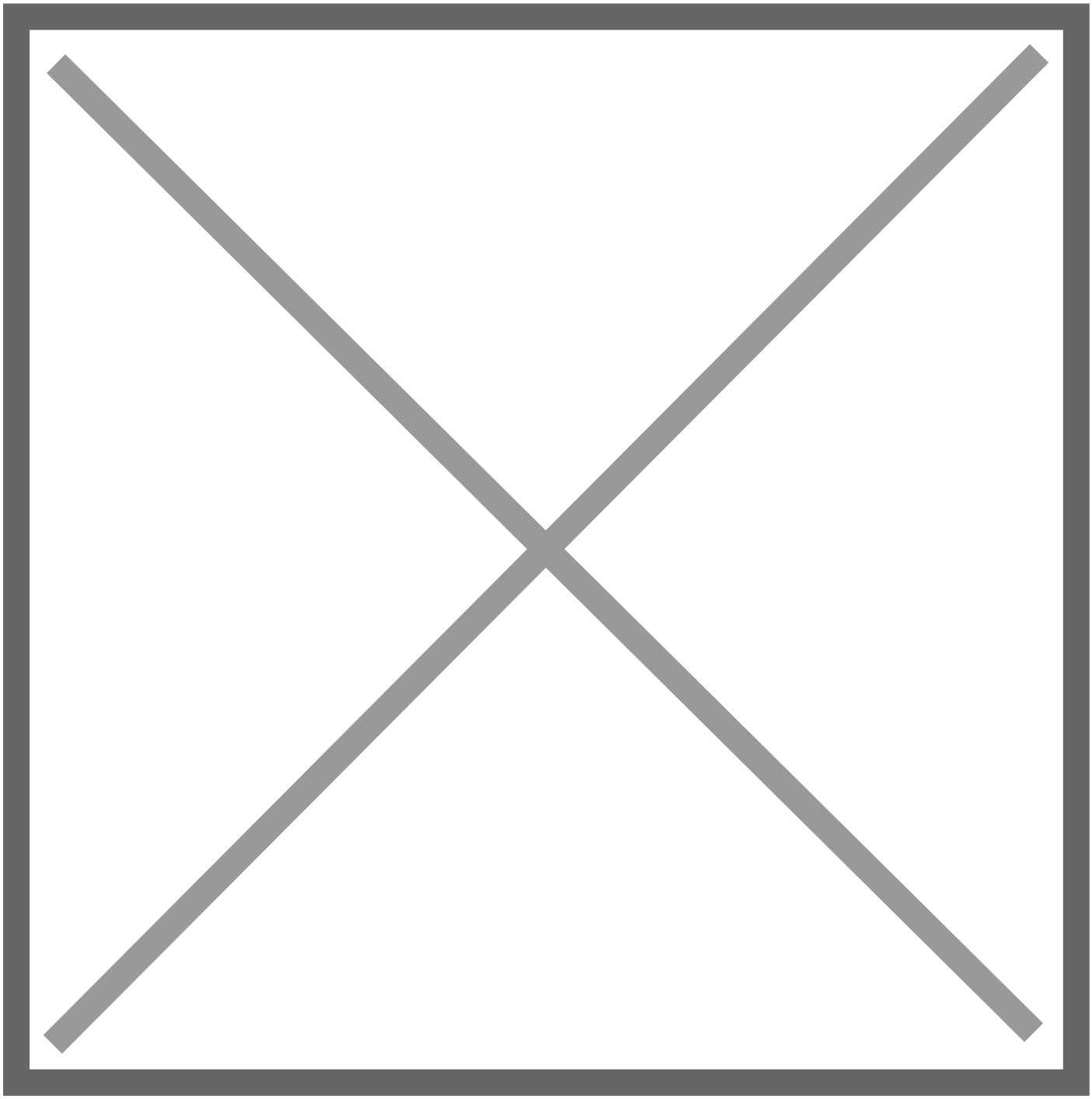


Sparking Family Engagement
Liberty, North Carolina, will soon be home to Toyota's first-ever North American battery plant. In nearby Greensboro, students have access to a strong STEM high school, but new learners often come in underprepared due to lack of STEM exposure in middle school.

To address this challenge, Driving Possibilities is working with Guilford County Schools, and Jackson Middle School specifically, to boost hands-on learning, teacher professional development and on-campus supports for middle school students and their families.

Family engagement is another area of focus, as families can be a critical source of support and motivation for students. “When family members have a deeper understanding of STEM careers, it can help build the student’s excitement as well,” says Erika Doolittle, Driving Possibilities program senior manager.

To make an even greater impact in North Carolina, Driving Possibilities is also developing a collaboration with Asheboro City Schools in Randolph County.

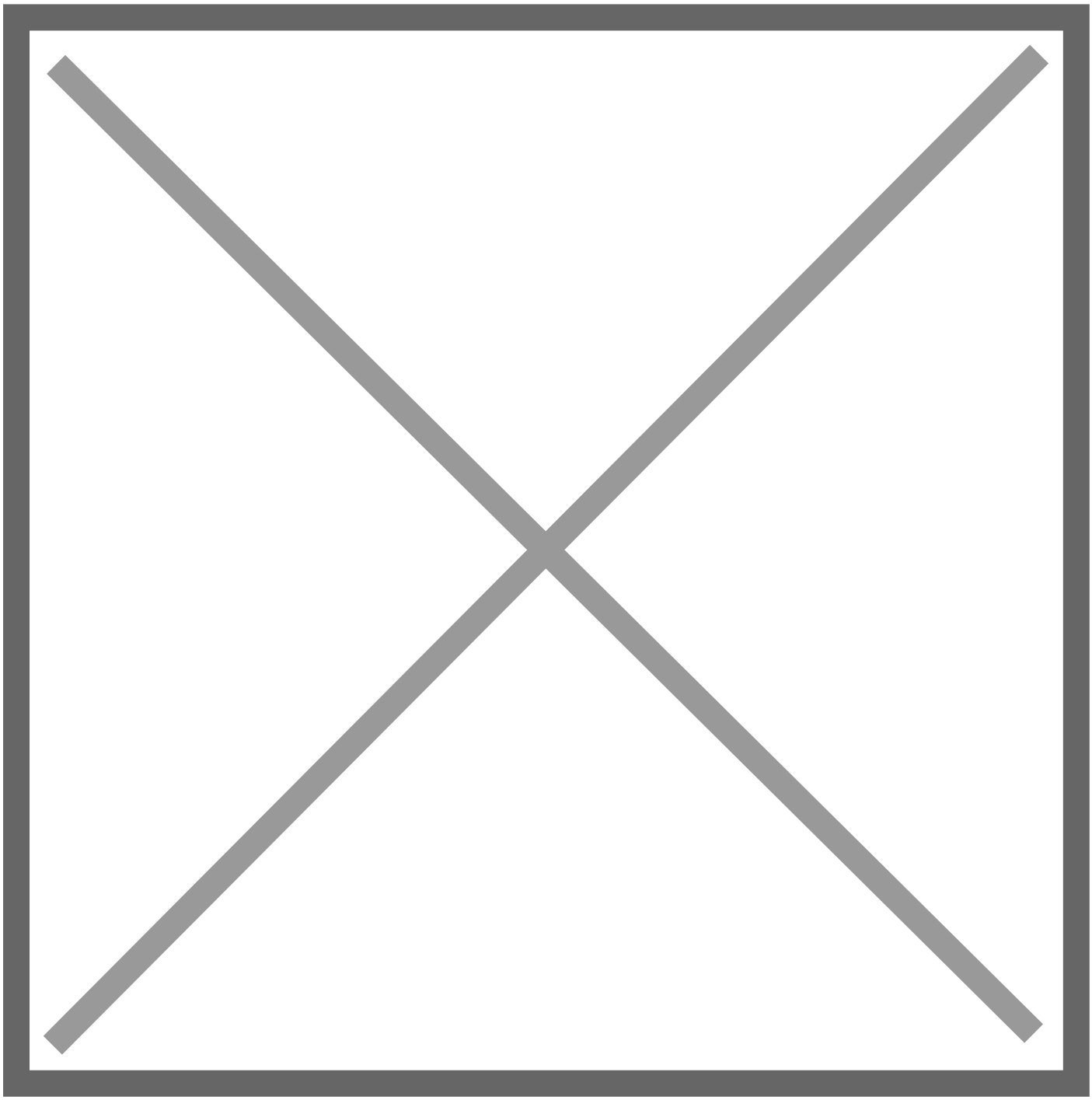


Lifting Barriers to Learning

In Georgia's Fulton County School district, 100 percent of students in the eight identified schools are socioeconomically disadvantaged, a number that had profound implications for Driving Possibilities. "In talking with the communities, it became clear that before we could focus on preparing students to thrive in STEM, we had to look at basic needs," says Destiny Whitaker, a Driving Possibilities senior analyst.

Driving Possibilities funding allowed more families to receive access to free food, counseling and other essential services coordinated by the district's SAFE (Student and Family Engagement) centers. Another local partner, the Fulton Education Foundation, was instrumental in finding new resources to support the work—for example, by creating a partnership with the online styling company Stitch Fix to provide students with free, high-quality clothing.

With expanded resources for basic needs in place, the Georgia team is now incorporating STEM elements into the program. One creative offering is Kennesaw State University's iTeach Maker Bus—a mobile learning space that offers experiential STEM activities and literally meets students where they are. "We found that bringing resources like the Maker Bus directly to communities is a real need. Families shouldn't have to go out of their way to access STEM," Whitaker says.



Translating Opportunity

In Mississippi, the Driving Possibilities team is working closely with the Lee County and Pontoctoc City school districts to enhance STEM teaching and reduce mobility barriers to STEM access. Overall learnings will also be shared with partners in Union County, where Toyota leads programs such as the 4T Academy.

In Pontoctoc City, where the need for literacy and language development has increased significantly in the past year, educators identified the need for additional language supports prior to tackling STEM. In response, Driving Possibilities is supporting an intensive language acquisition program that helps students develop the skills they

need to pass required assessments in Biology, U.S. History, English II, and Algebra I.

“Students who do not pass those assessments do not graduate high school. The program will provide support to our students and their families as they contribute to our community while they acquire soft skills, industry certifications and exposure to career pathways, to which they would otherwise not have access,” says Danielle Schwartz, a Driving Possibilities senior analyst.

The program is expected to support more than 117 students in the 2024-2025 school year, empowering them to pursue innovative learning opportunities like those offered by Driving Possibilities.

A Limitless Road Ahead

There’s more to come as Toyota USA Foundation continues to roll out the Driving Possibilities initiative to additional U.S. communities. To learn more, visit https://toyotaeffect.com/key-initiatives/driving-possibilities/.