

Microsoft talks up technology to kids

By Benjamin J. Romano

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Microsoft Chief Executive Steve Ballmer did a little market research, recruiting and philanthropy in one appearance before an audience of high-school students from around the country Friday.

During a speech in Redmond, which was webcast to teens gathered in Atlanta, New York, Silicon Valley and elsewhere, Ballmer announced a software grant worth \$5 million over three years to the National Urban League, a 97-year-old organization aimed at economic and social empowerment of African Americans.

The occasion was the 16th annual Minority Student Day, sponsored by Blacks at Microsoft, a 600-employee affinity group, one of more than 40 at the company.

Ballmer described efforts of Microsoft and the technology industry to diversify.

"If you look at the work force of folks, particularly in engineering, it tends to be not very diverse and we need to capture people early on in life, in high school even, and get women and people of color really interested and excited in math and technology as a field."

The students saw product demonstrations, attended lab sessions and heard from a panel of African-American Microsoft employees working in a variety of fields at the company, including finance, marketing, intellectual property and software development.

Many of their questions centered on consumer products such as the Xbox 360 and Zune.

"When the iPhone comes out, how will it affect sales of the Zune?" asked one local student.

Ballmer questioned the iPhone's \$500 price tag and asked the audience if anyone besides him had ever lost a cellphone. He added that Microsoft, with its Zune and phones running Windows Mobile software, is "going to compete like crazy."

Ballmer said Microsoft has "a unique opportunity and a unique responsibility" to give back to the community. He also acknowledged that Microsoft's altruism has an element of self-interest if it can get more people involved in technology.

"It's good for our company. It's good for our shareholders. It's good for the community."

Marc Morial, president and CEO of the National Urban League, said the software grant from Microsoft will allow the organization to bring technology to 102 communities across the nation in which it operates. His message for the students:

"You know, the bottom line is, if you don't know how to use a computer, well you ain't going nowhere. ... It is a tool of necessity. It's no longer a nicety."

That message wasn't lost on Abel Teklai, a junior at Garfield High School, who won first place in an essay contest on how he would get the most from employees if he were running a small business. He was interested in technology, but not sold on Microsoft yet.

"I'm just thinking about it," Teklai said. "Right now, I just know that I'm good at writing and I like technology, so wherever that takes me, I don't know."

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