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Why an IT exec is turning to 8th graders for the next big business idea

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Not content with passing the \$100 million sales mark, Ventech Solutions Inc. is seeking a blockbuster innovation that increases the IT company's valuation by fivefold.

And one place it's looking is the minds of Central Ohio eighth graders.

Ventech grew to \$115 million in revenue in 2016 from \$10 million two years earlier, I reported in this week's print edition of *Columbus Business First*.

Now the Columbus company is pouring half its profits into research and development, founder and President Ravi Kunduru said. About 90 percent of that is toward projects that directly help its clients in federal and state agencies, or in industries they affect such as health care.

The final tenth is "pure ideation," Kunduru told me, including an after-school program where middle- and high-school students form a think tank to come up with a business idea the company could invest in. The first round was seven months, and Kunduru wants to enlist another group.

The company can't achieve its ambitious goals simply by continuing what it does now, Kunduru said. It needs a "moon shot."

"Those things can happen only from that generation," he said.

The students are told to "think super-big," come up with an idea and design a business plan. It doesn't matter if the idea the youths generate is for an industry Ventech already serves, or if it's a consumer application. If Ventech decides to invest and develop the project to commercialization, the youths get 5 percent ownership.

So far the first students have drawn on what they know. One suggestion was an app aimed at their peers that auto-replies to texts or calls during school hours, when phone use is forbidden.

"Their ability to present in front of executives was impressive," Kunduru said. "The beauty I saw is there was no limitation to their thinking."

Carrie Ghose



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Ravi Kunduru

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