



STEM activities opening up for girls

There's a widespread belief that the STEM disciplines — science, technology, engineering and math — are off-limits for women and girls. And while progress has been made, men continue to outnumber women by about 3:1 in STEM college classrooms and STEM jobs.

However, with the recent increased emphasis placed on STEM education, many schools have tried to open up the STEM world to more girls.

Recent events involving students at Old Orchard Junior High School highlight that effort.

Twenty-five eighth-grade girls from OOHJ joined hundreds of others from local schools for the Futures Unlimited conference at Oakton Community College in January. The all-day, girls-only conference brought in experts and role models from a variety of professions to make the case that young women can thrive in STEM careers.

Speakers included a pediatric dentist, an environmental scientist, and a recent college graduate who landed a job as an engineer at ComEd. All three women have achieved success in fields that were dominated by men.

In the afternoon, the girls engaged in hands-on workshops. One session involved taking apart and reassembling a prosthetic hand designed by high school students.

The OOHJ girls competed in team projects as well. One called for building a tower out of pipe cleaners, and a second had them design a device to transport plastic balls along a strand of fishing line using paper cups and straws.

One item that caught the students' attention was the announcement that Niles North High School is offering a new

all-girls engineering class in fall 2018. Coupled with the array of STEM classes and extracurriculars available at the high school, that news whetted the appetite of the OOHJ students to move on to the next level.

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Old Orchard Junior High students engaged in a robotics competition earlier this year at Culver School in Niles.

“Our girls loved it,” said Sarah Larsen, an eighth-grade language arts teacher who chaperoned the event. “What I was hearing from some of them was ‘How am I going to fit all this in?’”

Another OOHJ chaperone, eighth-grade science teacher and Science Olympiad coach Judy Kim, said, “For some girls, this is right in their wheelhouse, while others had their eyes opened a little bit.” She added, “I hope we attend again and get to bring more girls the next time.”

OOHJ girls have also taken part in two recent robotics competitions.

The first was held at Culver School in Niles in January. Teams from OOHJ, Lincoln Junior High in Skokie, Parkview School in Morton Grove and Culver went head-to-head in a competition sponsored by VEX Robotics. The object was to direct robots to pick up a variety of balls — some round, some shaped like American footballs — and transfer them over a wall to the other side of the playing area.

The OOHJ robotics club worked for months to prepare for the contest, designing, building and programming robots using materials from VEX Robotics. This is the first year for the club, sponsored by STEM teacher Denise Madans.

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Parent Mentors complete their training

The Niles Township Parent Mentor program capped off another successful year at an evening celebration Feb. 28 at Old Orchard Junior High School. Twenty-eight people completed a training program that began in October, joining 180 others who have served as parent mentors in Niles Township schools since the program launched in 2013.

The Parent Mentor program brings parent volunteers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds into the classroom. The parents tend to be English language learners themselves, and in many cases have children receiving EL support at school. Each mentor is assigned to a classroom (not their own child's) where they assist the teacher and work with students.

"There are many success stories of parent mentors returning to work in their child's school in the cafeteria, as bus monitors, recess supervisors, teacher's aides, and in some cases as substitute teachers," said Diana Juarez, the director of the Niles Township ELL Parent Center located at the Educational Services Center. "Some parents go on to take classes at the Parent Center with the goal of improving language

skills, becoming a citizen, finding a job, and being more involved in the school community and community at large."

District 68 is one of two districts to participate in the program from the start. Parent mentors can now be found in eight schools in four Niles Township districts, including all three District 68 elementary schools.

The program puts parents primarily in classrooms pre-K through 2nd grade, although some parents have mentored in 4th and 5th grade classrooms "when their experience and comfort level with English allowed them to flourish there," Ms. Juarez said.

"Parent mentors work directly with students in classrooms," said Karen Bradley, the principal at Highland. "They might play a math game with a small group, read with an individual child, help with cutting and pasting, read a book aloud to the class, etc."

Interest in the Parent Mentor program has spread mainly by word

of mouth. Alex Garcia, the program organizer and a District 68 parent, visits participating schools during drop-off and pick-up time as well, distributing information about recruitment.

Ms. Garcia said, "I believe parents who participate in this parent engagement program learn to build strong relationships inside the school with teachers and administrators, and in the community. These relationships empower them. They learn that parents play an important role in the success of their children's education, in the schools, and in the community."

"It is particularly very validating for the child whose parent is here to see their parent as an important person in the school, as a teacher," Dr. Bradley said. "It's an invaluable partnership for our schools, helping parents to learn about the U.S. school system firsthand, building bridges between the school and individual homes but also building bridges with communities."

STEM activities

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The club is made up of five girls and four boys, but on the day of the contest only the girls were fully prepared to compete. How did they fare?

"Not so well," Madans said. "But it was our first time competing and our team was up against schools with more experience. And our students were so excited. They were here the next day saying things like 'I've got some ideas' and 'I saw one group doing something I liked but I think I have an even better way to do it.'"

On March 6, the robotics club entered four teams — this time with boys — in a regional event that featured 23 teams from five schools that feed into District 219.



OOJH students at the Futures Unlimited conference.

"I hope the enthusiasm continues and even more students come out for the robotics club next year," Madans said. "It's great preparation for high school, but it's also just a lot of fun."

HIGHLIGHTS is a community newsletter published three times a year by Skokie School District 68.

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Board of Education meetings are held at 7 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month in the Educational Service Center at 9440 Kenton Ave. You are invited to attend.

HIGHLIGHTS is written and produced by Complete Communications, Inc. Skokie, IL.

District revises plan for EL students

One of the first tasks Barbara Marler took on when she became District 68 director of EL services last year was to carry out the first review of the program since 2011 to ensure better services for English language learners.

“The district believes in the value of a continuous improvement model for all its programs and services,” Dr. Marler said. “It is just good practice to periodically gather our data, catch up on recent research, reflect on what we have been doing and contemplate how we might improve.”

Dr. Marler headed a team of 17 teachers, administrators, board members and parents to conduct the review, which began last April and finished in January. They examined state and federal legal parameters, researched best

practices, gathered internal data and observed in three Chicago-area districts with EL populations.

Dr. Marler presented the team’s plan to the Board in February.

District 68 does not offer bilingual instruction because there are so many different language groups among the students. Up to now, students would receive 30 to 90 minutes per day of pull-out instruction for speaking, reading and writing English. That meant students with little English proficiency, and even those students further along in English language acquisition, were struggling the rest of the school day.

“Our greatest realization was that we needed to increase the amount of time during which English learners receive specialized, targeted and com-

prehensible instruction from a teacher with additional training related to the education of children who are learning English as their second language,” Dr. Marler explained. “We wanted to be sure that this type of instruction was extended to the content areas of math, science and social studies.”

The learning team was a bit surprised by one of its findings. When assessing EL offerings, district staff typically counted the number of students eligible for language assistance services, but did not account for students who come from homes where a language other than English is spoken — the majority of all students, they realized.

The revised EL program, set to roll out in fall 2018, will now take those students into account, along with those who qualify for EL services.

Board signs off on new five-year plan

The District 68 Board has approved a new long-range strategic plan for the next five years.

The new plan lays out goals and objectives in five key areas:

- Focus on the whole child
- Cultural responsiveness, equity and inclusion
- Teaching and learning
- Communication and engagement
- Future generation learning environment

“The components of the plan work together to form a whole that will guide our efforts in the years ahead, and they

are an excellent reflection of the values of our board and our community,” said Board President Una McGeough.

“I also think the strategic plan articulates priorities that speak to the complexity of life and education in current times — for example, thinking about the whole child, rather than just test scores. While student educational achievement is crucial — it’s at the heart of what we do — it is built upon a foundation of social, physical, emotional and psychological strength.”

After conducting an online survey, a committee that included parents,

students, business people and local leaders as well teachers, staff, administrators and Board members met in October to discuss the new plan.

Ms. McGeough said, “As a Board, we were really pleased with the participation of a good variety of stakeholders. It was a pretty long day, where people remained engaged and committed to the process throughout. Many ideas were generated, many voices were heard. We were also thrilled with the participation of some of our Old Orchard Junior High students. They were articulate, thoughtful and inspiring in voicing what District 68 can aspire to, and what matters to students.”

She added, “I’m excited to see our work unfold under the guidance of this plan, and I am so appreciative of the time community members spent not only on that Saturday in October, but also time spent later in reviewing and responding to our draft.”

New student registrations under way

If you are new to Skokie School District 68 or have a child eligible to attend kindergarten for the 2018-2019 school year (must be 5 years old on or before Sept. 1, 2018), please contact the district registrar at 847-568-7635 to schedule a registration appointment. District 68 also offers an early childhood preschool program, located in the same building as Old Orchard Junior High School. For more information, call 847-677-4560.

HIGHLIGHTS

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Letter from the Superintendent

Dear Community Members,

It is unfortunate that I feel the need to write about a topic that is not pleasant for a school community.

Given the most recent and tragic school shooting, parent and educator anxiety about safety in public schools has increased. As a superintendent

and father of three high-schoolers, I understand that all too well. Fewer scenarios loom more horrific than that of innocent children and teachers targeted by someone intent on creating as much loss of life as possible.

Despite our perception that gun violence in schools is increasing and the very valid sentiment that enough is enough, a report published by Northeastern University in February 2018 indicates that there are fewer school-related shooting deaths today than there were in the '90s. Initially I found the statistics surprising, but then began thinking about how the media influences our perceptions. It wasn't long ago that access to news was more limited than it is now. Today it is hard to avoid the constant updates from all corners of the country.

Our school district works with the Skokie Police every year to develop and assess safety measures designed to limit access to our schools and protect students and staff. We have secure entrances and, with police supervision, regularly practice safety drills required by state law. We will continue to assess and implement security improvements to protect our community's most precious assets, our children.

Over the last few weeks, I have had to remind myself that our schools are safer today than they have ever been. I am not writing to convince you that there is not a serious gun-violence problem. Any loss of life, student or otherwise, is

too much. My point is to provide context, so we can address school safety calmly and effectively. Gun violence is a serious problem, and I have been heartened by the national youth movement that is demanding that adult decision-makers find productive solutions. While there appears to be a growing consensus that something must change, the debate about how best to approach solutions will not be easy. It will require listening and compromise on the part of adults. Our children are demanding that and should be able to expect it of us.

On March 14, 2018, the majority of our students at Old Orchard Junior High chose to participate in a peaceful and respectful student walkout, under the supervision of staff, to honor the memory of victims of school gun violence. Some students chose to express their thoughts in other ways and some chose not to participate at all. As Superintendent, I was exceedingly proud of our students' conduct and the seriousness with which they expressed their concerns. I can think of few more valuable lessons for our students to learn than that of self-advocacy and civic engagement (a social studies learning standard) for something they believe has real purpose.

I encourage you to support and look after one another, and especially our young people. I wonder to what extent the disaffected youth who perpetrate these crimes feel connected to kind, compassionate, and caring adults who might make a difference. It is not enough to expect that someone else will do it ... we all must be aware of how we can be a positive force in the lives of the children in our communities.

Each day is an act of faith. I encourage you to draw upon your relationships with family and friends, as well as your personal beliefs, to exercise that faith and be part of the solution.

Sincerely,

James E. Garwood, Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools

Our mission is to develop children who are confident and creative learners. We provide a rigorous curriculum and a supportive school environment that promotes high achievement, encourages personal growth, and meets the unique needs of each child.