



Danbury Digest

District News & Highlights

Fall 2019

Superintendent's message

Dear Danbury Staff, Parents and Supporters,

Welcome back! The first weeks of school have already been successful, and I want to thank the many teachers and school staff who worked behind the scenes to get school off to a great start. Whether you are a returning staff member or a parent, whether you are new to the district or have been here for many years, we look forward to your involvement and your contributions to our Danbury educational family. Your work in our schools and communities are what help our schools continue to improve.

This year more than any other, we face the additional challenge of rapidly increasing enrollment. Buses, classrooms and schools are certainly full of children ready for learning. I believe that challenges present opportunities. While the immediate challenge is to incorporate more space and services, the opportunity lies in working with our talented and committed administrators, teachers and staff to offer some of the most progressive and challenging programs in the area. We are excited that our schools are attracting new students, and we embrace the diversity, energy and enthusiasm that they bring to our community. I remain grateful for the optimism and commitment of all of our administrators, teachers, and staff in the classrooms who are working so hard to embrace the challenges and realize the opportunities.

This fall we welcomed the fifth cohort of first-year students in the Early College Opportunity (ECO) program at Danbury High School, the second district in the state to offer such a program. These students will have an opportunity to earn an Associate Degree from Naugatuck Valley Community College simultaneously with their high school diploma. We are also continuing our initiatives inspired by the Sandy Hook Promise – the past several years of this program have helped us to cultivate a culture of acceptance and compassion in our schools.

Finally, please join me in celebrating our 2019-20 Teacher of the Year, Matt Calvanese. A long-time educator in the district, Calvanese is an excellent representative of all of our dedicated and energetic faculty. We welcomed Matt at the Board of Education's first meeting of the school year, to the applause of his colleagues and the parents of his many students over the years. This was a wonderful way to usher in the new school year.

Looking forward to a productive and exciting school year, I wish you and all of the Danbury Community well as fall gets under way.

Dr. Sal V. Pascarella
Superintendent of Schools

A greenhouse grows at Westside Middle School

It was the end of last school year that some students at Westside Middle School Academy started building a greenhouse behind the school. Those students have since moved on to high school, but the greenhouse remains part of their legacy.

Planning for the eight-by-twenty foot structure began last fall as part of the eighth-grade exploration curriculum, which included reading food activist Michael Pollan's book "The Omnivore's Dilemma." The students became interested in backyard farming and then raised nearly \$3,000 to build their own greenhouse.

With the help of local businesses, including Lowe's, the students built the foundation and began putting up the walls. What they learned from the project extended far beyond the greenhouse walls:

"It's important for the school because it's good for the environment. We're making vegetables with soil; we're not using fertilizers or plastics," said student Jayce Tepan.

"We learned about the importance of growing your own food and now healthy it is," said Rachael Roberts, whose parents plant gardens in their yard.

"We learned how to build. We want to finish and start growing stuff," said Erin Bleecker. "I was surprised to learn about the bad things they do to animals (referring to Pollan's book). Projects like this help bring non-chemical foods that don't ruin the environment."

Andrea LaRosa, STEM exploration teacher, who worked with the school's theme coach Jon Neuhausel to bring the greenhouse to life, said the students were excited to put in the hard work.

"We wanted to have a project and an outdoor space for other students. We wanted to create an additional classroom with a purpose," LaRosa said. "I was so impressed with their work to fundraise and am proud of their dedication. They really pulled it together."



District Teacher of the Year 2019-20: 'Math is for everyone' AIS math teacher says making math fun is easy as 1-2-3



Math doesn't come easily for everyone, and Matthew Calvanese, a fourth-grade math teacher at the Academy of International Studies, knows it. That's why he works hard to reach every student in his classroom, from the student who can't sit still to the one who finds math just a pile of numbers.

"I want students to know that math is for everyone," said Calvanese, who asks students to write down how they feel about the subject at the beginning of the year. By the end of the year, most of the negative feelings about the subject have waned and students find they enjoy math, thanks to Calvanese.

"I focus on making relationships with the kids and I ask them what their interests are," Calvanese said. "I try to find something I can connect to and we can bond over."

For all of his efforts, Calvanese was named the district's "Teacher of the Year 2019-20."

"Matthew is the one of those teachers who brings out the best in our students by being approachable and making lessons practical," said Superintendent Dr. Sal Pascarella. "He has an excellent rapport with students and works tirelessly to make sure that he engages each

child, which isn't always easy when there are 23 students in a classroom. His enthusiasm coupled with his knowledge of delivering curriculum is the key to student success."

Calvanese has been teaching in the district at AIS since 2010 and was a substitute for a year before that. He earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education/psychology from Western Connecticut State University, a master's in educational degree in educational leadership from Quinnipiac University and a sixth-year certificate also in educational leadership from the University of Connecticut.

"I did my student-teaching in Danbury and I just really liked it," Calvanese said. "I like the diversity of the district and that everyone gets brought together. It's also important that kids get a good education regardless of their zip code and circumstances. The district offers a solid education. I like the magnet theme and focus. We talk about socially responsible global citizens. The world is wide open, and it's an amazing thing to have that awareness that students here share."

Despite the glory of his success, Calvanese said he still finds it challenging to meet the demands of more than 100 students every day.

"I always feel like there's not enough time to help everyone," he said. "I get them for just one year and I need to make the most of it."

Calvanese said being chosen as Teacher of the Year is exciting, but he gives a nod to his colleagues for helping him along the way.

"It's an honor, but it's also an honor for our school," Calvanese said. "The other teachers influenced me, and I have learned from them. It's a celebration of all our hard work and dedication."

Teachers spend part of summer getting ready for school



Kori Krafick, a language arts specialist at Morris Street School, and Marissa Fraser, a third-grade teacher at Ellsworth Avenue School, held a Toolkit Workshop on Aug. 12, with the help of Kate DeBarber, a coach from New Milford. Teachers and coaches from Danbury and other area towns and from New York, New Jersey and New Hampshire also came to learn about the program. The program is a vital classroom complement that helps teachers create tools, such as charts, demonstration texts and checklists to support reading and writing instruction.



School, city, community turn Pembroke playground dream into reality

The new playground at Pembroke School is ready for play. The nearly \$270,000 project is near completion after more than a year of tremendous effort and planning by school faculty -- and donations from the City of Danbury and many area schoolchildren. On Wednesday, Sept. 25, at 5 p.m., school officials will hold a ribbon cutting at the playground.

Pembroke principal Dr. Sharon Epple is excited about the progress made in order to make the playscape a reality.

"It looks like big Legos out there," Epple said. "The goal of this playscape was to create a more accessible playground that would allow all students to fully enjoy the use of each piece of equipment and also to get all the kids to play together."

Epple and Leigh Viviano, a former teacher at the school who is still involved with the project, spearheaded the project at an initial cost of \$150,000. However, issues with drainage nearly made the project cost-prohibitive. The City of Danbury stepped up to help match the money the school had raised through fundraisers and donations, a move the City Council approved at its Aug. 6 meeting.

Area schools and businesses, including Scotland Elementary School in Ridgefield and Fairfield County Bank (\$1,000 and \$2,000, respectively), King Street Intermediate, Stedley Rough School, Park Avenue School and Danbury High, had helped get the project started. On May 31, the Westside Middle School Academy donated \$620.

The new playground is unique in that it was built with a special concern for students who are challenged navigating older equipment. Pembroke has been selected to serve a number of students with disabilities in the district and, therefore, has six classrooms, one at each grade level (kindergarten through fifth grade) devoted to these students.

"Students with disabilities are going to be able to go up the same ramp as everyone else," said Epple.

The colorful mostly blue and yellow playground has several playscapes with ramps and ladders and a spinner. One of Viviano's initial concerns was that children with disabilities weren't able to navigate equipment that was too high or steep. Some students may be prone to seizures, so the anxiety of tackling a dangerous incline can lead to serious medical issues. Children in wheelchairs must also be considered. The new playground includes platforms that are wheelchair-accessible.

Because there is no other accessible playground in the district -- the closest being in Ridgefield's Ballard Park and another in Brookfield -- the playground will be open to anyone afterschool and on the weekends.



The Pembroke School playground will officially be opened Sept. 25.

Story by Marrcus Danzy

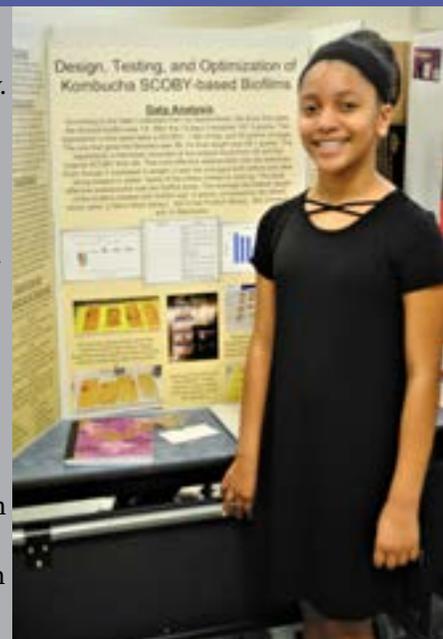
Photo by Robin Provey

Danbury student earns top national science award

Gabriella "Ella" Brown was named one of the Top 300 MASTERS in the 2019 Broadcom MASTERS, a program of Society for Science & the Public. The eighth-grader from Westside Middle School Academy was one of 300 winners chosen from more than 2300 entrants across the country. Ella was one of six students awarded at last spring's Connecticut Science & Engineering Fair for her project: "Design, testing, and optimization of Kombucha scoby-based biofilms." There, she earned first place for seventh-grade Life Science. She was also an Urban School Challenge Awards Middle School Finalist and won the Peer-to-Peer Awards for seventh-grade Grade Life Sciences. It was at the fair that she also earned an invitation to the Broadcom MASTERS National Competition.

"We are always proud of our students, especially when they achieve at this level," said Superintendent Dr. Sal Pascarella. "Ella is a model example of how our science curriculum challenges students to experiment, investigate and learn in a hands-on, researched-based environment. We are fortunate to have great faculty and facilities that show students that the possibilities are endless in terms of what they can achieve."

On Sept. 18, 30 finalists will be selected from the 300 top MASTERS. Those finalists will receive an all-expense paid trip to Washington, D.C., to attend the Broadcom MASTERS finals week competition Oct. 25-30. At the competition, finalists will present their research and compete in hands-on challenges for top prizes, including funds to attend STEM summer camp and a Samueli prize of \$25,000.



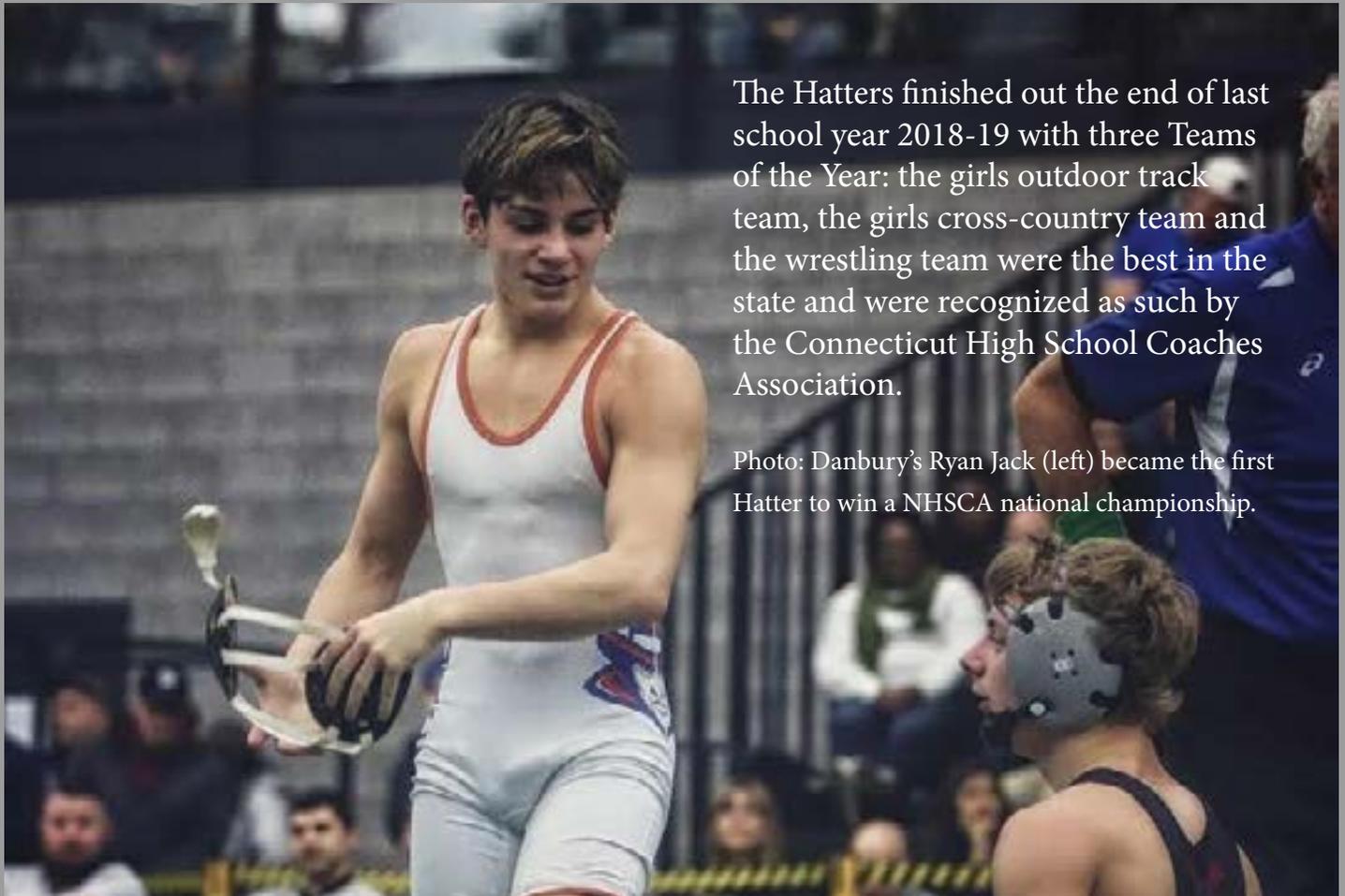
District schools to implement new visitor screening process

The Danbury Public Schools is using a new visitor registration system this school year. Raptor will be a frontline defense against registered sex offenders; information from government-issued IDs will be compared to a sex offender database before school staff can print a badge that allows a visitor to be admitted on school grounds.

The system will be used each time a visitor, contractor or volunteer signs in, or a guardian signs out a student. The information is compared against more than 750,000 known sex offenders across the country.

DPS maintains that safety of all students is its highest priority and is undertaking to improve on security measures.

Three Connecticut 'Team of the Year' titles



The Hatters finished out the end of last school year 2018-19 with three Teams of the Year: the girls outdoor track team, the girls cross-country team and the wrestling team were the best in the state and were recognized as such by the Connecticut High School Coaches Association.

Photo: Danbury's Ryan Jack (left) became the first Hatter to win a NHSCA national championship.

Local business donates words of encouragement to Westside Middle School

Students at Westside Middle School Academy were surrounded by words of encouragement when they returned to school in August the fall. Employees of Ingersoll Auto spent the day on July 18 painting inspirational messages in the student rest rooms.

"We are so excited and thankful that they were willing to do this for us," said Administrative Assistant Sandy Sanchez. "We want to thank them for being positive leaders in our community."

"Dream Big" and "Be Brave, Be Kind" are among the inspiring words.



Danbury students among those recognized for work on watershed environments 'Finding Our Way' collaboration with WCSU, grant from NOAA

Several Danbury middle school students were recognized for their work this summer on projects designed to enhance or better the watershed communities, as part of a year-long program, "Finding Our Way: An Experiential Watershed Learning Program for Middle School Children and Their Families," a collaboration between Danbury Public Schools, Danbury Family Learning Center and Western Connecticut State University.

Dr. Theodora Pinou, professor of Biological and Environmental Sciences, runs the STEM program through a grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Open to 30 middle school students from the Danbury area, the program offers seventh-graders and their families a yearlong integrated environmental community stewardship experience focused on New England watersheds. It provides a wide range of educational experience focusing on water resources and ecosystem biodiversity as part of the NOAA Office of Education's Bay Watershed Education and Training (B-WET) Program.

"Finding Our Way," which meets on the WCSU Midtown campus in Danbury, held its award ceremony in July and the following Danbury students were recognized for their outstanding work:

Joshua Maruffi from Westside Middle School Academy, took first place: his stewardship focused on learning about and helping birds, bats and pollinators. Joshua built and installed several habitats at his house, recorded frog calls and tracked bird development. He also involved younger students by leading a Cub Scout troop on a trail cleanup.

Sabrina Serpa Smith and Marisol Tapia Rodriguez, also from WMSA, together tied for third place. Their ongoing project includes planning and executing important steps to improve pollinator diversity at their school. The two students planted native plants and built benches for their school's outdoor classroom in coordination with school officials. They also established a school "Green Team," and led younger students in restoring and developing the wildlife habitat.

Also tied for third place was WSMA's Juliet Dahlstrom, who learned about composting and built a bin for her yard. She also cleaned an extensive local trail adjacent to a stream, collecting 26 pounds of garbage.

Joshua Hatter, Westside Middle School Academy, received Honorable Mention for his work in cleaning up a park and working to improve his school's recycling system. He worked over a long period creating fliers and speaking to classmates about using school recycling bins.

Rogers Park Middle School's Matthew Waldron also received Honorable Mention for his project to encourage lunchroom recycling, which is in planning stages and will be implemented during this school year. With his school's environmental club, Matthew will create a recycling bin for single-use plastic utensils and work with custodians on proper disposal. Additionally, he will create an incentive program using raffle tickets to reward students for bringing their own utensils.

Diego Soto, from Broadview Middle School, received a Participation Award for his project that explored the pollution mitigating properties of moss and possible ways to use it to reduce car exhaust contaminants.

Carrie Rowe, teacher and Environmental Club leader at Rogers Park received the 2019 WCSU NOAA B-WET Stewardship Classroom Award. Rowe was recognized for encouraging environmental stewardship in the school community through leading the environmental club and fostering Matthew Waldron's lunchroom recycling initiative, a program that will continue throughout the school year.

WSMSA science teacher and theme coach Jon Neuhausel received the 2019 WCSU NOAA B-WET Stewardship Classroom Award. Neuhausel, recognized for fostering hands-on science learning for students through a renewal project of the Outdoor Habitat area. Neuhausel encourages all students to make stewardship a part of their daily lives.

Finding Our Way partners with WCSU's Weather Center, the Candlewood Lake Authority and the Atlantic Marine Conservation Society to study the life cycle and behavior of organisms that rely on the watershed for resources. It also works with the NOAA Fisheries Lab in Milford and FirstLight Power Resources to learn about sustainable clean energy such as biofuel and hydroelectric power, and to examine the cost and benefit of such resources in terms of impact on local fish populations and associated habitats.

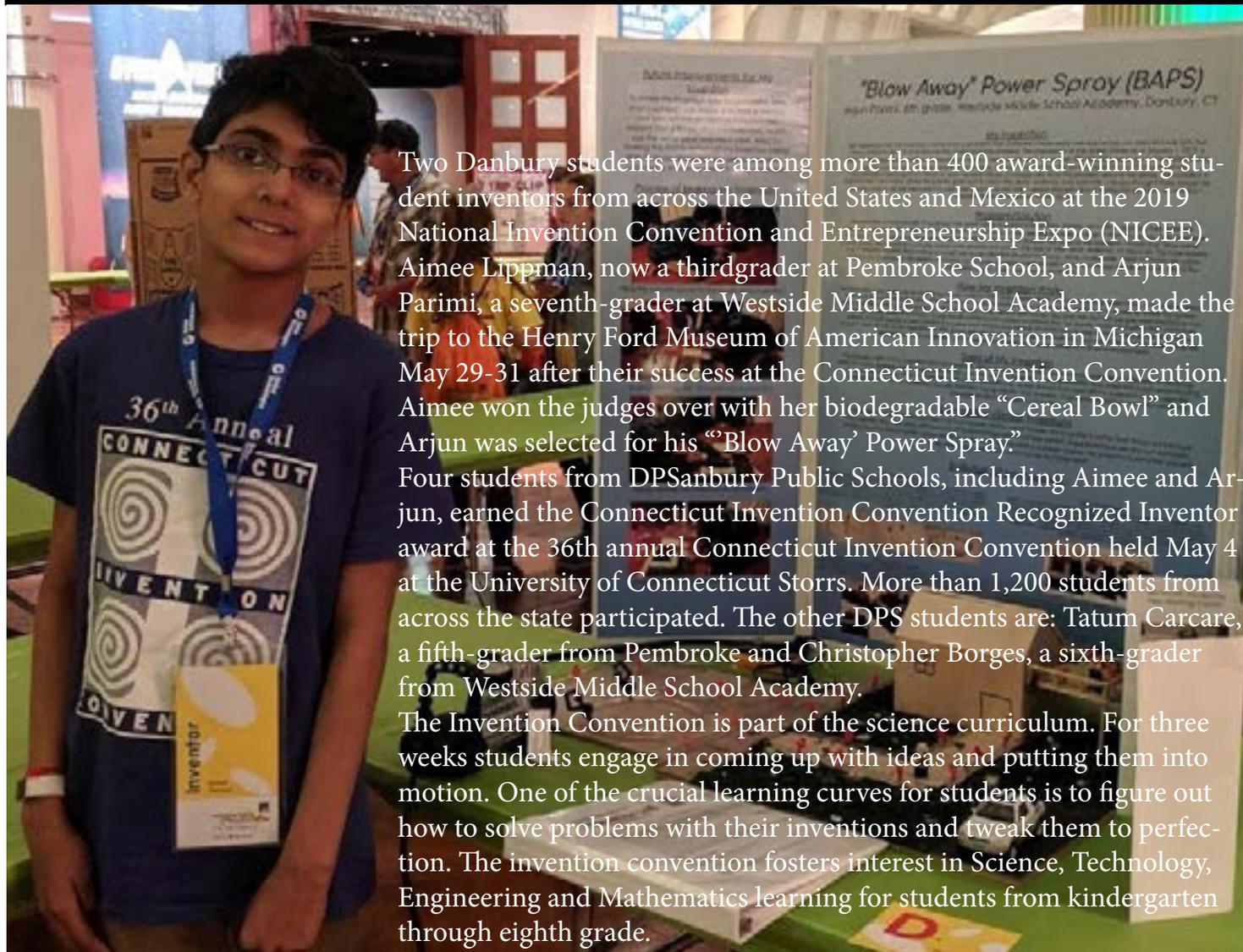
With the help of Praxair, the program was able to include a 12-day summer enrichment experience, two family science summer events and four family "Science Saturdays" during the academic year. The program uses facilities at the WCSU's two campuses in Danbury, including the computer science and library facilities and Weather Center, and the Westside campus Nature Preserve. Family science meetings during the academic year provide support for parents to complete online content training and certification, habitat use analysis experiments, participation in a Tri-State Weather conference, and Skywarn Weather Monitoring training.

The summer enrichment program offers science and math experiments and field trips, providing students with a head start in STEM fields, as well as building a foundation of environmental stewardship and literacy. The program integrates writing, skills building, recreation, reading, data analysis and teamwork. By the end of the summer, teams of families led by their students develop bilingual public service announcements in the language of their choice.

Selected middle school science teachers receive 28 hours of professional development during the fall and spring to develop, implement and refine their fresh water-related classroom. They also are hired to work the summer experiences, which adds another 60 hours to their STEM training. Science teachers are trained to integrate NOAA Ocean Literacy program with Standards in their classrooms.

Reaching out to disadvantaged, minority and female students, the participating schools include Broadview Middle School, Rogers Park Middle School and Westside Middle School Academy. Ten additional students were selected by lottery from Bethel, New Fairfield, New Haven, Ridgefield and Wilton.

Two Danbury students compete in National Invention Convention



Two Danbury students were among more than 400 award-winning student inventors from across the United States and Mexico at the 2019 National Invention Convention and Entrepreneurship Expo (NICEE). Aimee Lippman, now a thirdgrader at Pembroke School, and Arjun Parimi, a seventh-grader at Westside Middle School Academy, made the trip to the Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation in Michigan May 29-31 after their success at the Connecticut Invention Convention. Aimee won the judges over with her biodegradable “Cereal Bowl” and Arjun was selected for his “Blow Away’ Power Spray.”

Four students from DPSanbury Public Schools, including Aimee and Arjun, earned the Connecticut Invention Convention Recognized Inventor award at the 36th annual Connecticut Invention Convention held May 4 at the University of Connecticut Storrs. More than 1,200 students from across the state participated. The other DPS students are: Tatum Carcare, a fifth-grader from Pembroke and Christopher Borges, a sixth-grader from Westside Middle School Academy.

The Invention Convention is part of the science curriculum. For three weeks students engage in coming up with ideas and putting them into motion. One of the crucial learning curves for students is to figure out how to solve problems with their inventions and tweak them to perfection. The invention convention fosters interest in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics learning for students from kindergarten through eighth grade.

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For coverage of school events or to submit school news, contact Robin Provey: robineprovey@aol.com or the Board of Education at (203) 797-4701.

SCHOOL CALENDAR

September

24: One Hour Early Release for Students-T-Eval
30: Rosh Hashanah-Schools Closed

October

9: Yom Kippur-schools closed
14: Professional Development-Schools Closed
29: One Hour Early Release for Students/PD