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IN BRIEF is published three times a year by Skokie School District 68.

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Applied Technology program to adopt STEM concept

Plans are in the works to expand STEM instruction — science, technology, engineering, and mathematics — at Old Orchard Junior High School. The idea is to transform the current Applied Technology program to one that is more STEM-oriented. The school has applied for a two-year, \$20,000 grant from Project Lead the Way (PLTW) to help underwrite the project.

PLTW, a non-profit, provides STEM education programs to K-12 schools in the U.S. It started in 1997 to help boost the number of engineers in the country by providing hands-on experience to potential engineers at an earlier age. It has grown to a network of more than 4,000 schools in all 50 states.

If the grant is approved, it will be used to pay for teaching materials, training, and any remodeling that might be necessary. Computers currently used in the Applied Tech program will be updated as well.

“I’m really excited,” said OOJH principal Robin Hawley. “This is the kind of programming you’d expect to see for gifted kids — and we’ll be offering it to every student in the school.”

As things stand, OOJH expects to roll out the STEM program over three years starting in 2012-13. The program will use a PLTW curriculum called Gateway to Technology, which is designed for middle-schoolers and intended to prepare them for

more advanced classes in high school.

In the first year, the program will feature a design and modeling unit that will be offered three times over the course of the year in 12-week blocks as part of the school’s Encore program of electives. All sixth-graders will be required to take the STEM class, while seventh- and eighth-graders can take it as one of their Encore selections.

The following year, sixth-graders will start with the design and modeling unit, and students in the two upper grades will study a unit on automation and robotics. In 2014-15, a third unit (yet to be determined) will be introduced for eighth-graders.

Leading the STEM classes will be the current Applied Tech teacher, Denise Madans, and another teacher, still to be hired, who will also provide technology support. PLTW will provide two weeks of intense training for teachers over the summer at the University of Illinois, either in Chicago or at the Champaign campus.

Madans hasn’t seen the curriculum yet, but she knows it will include use of a 3-D modeling and design program called Autodesk Inventor. To prepare herself, she is taking a computer-aided design (CAD) course at Oakton Community College that includes training on the Inventor software.

“I want to get some background,” Madans

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Districts, college join to improve ELL teaching

More and more, area schools must educate students who come from a non-English-speaking background. A budding partnership that several local school districts have formed with National Louis University (NLU) will help teachers with this important task.

The Multilingual Schools Network, which includes District 68, District 73½ and Niles Township High School District 219, has received a five-year, \$1.7 million grant from the U.S. Dept. of Education to implement a Multilingual STEM Success project. The project will focus on preparing teachers, paraprofessionals and parents to help English language learners (ELLs) learn science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

“We realized early on that Niles Township has a lot of experience working with multilingual families—and not just Spanish-speaking families. There are [scores of] languages represented” in these districts, said Tina Nolan, associate director of Partnerships at NLU and the partnership liaison for the Multilingual STEM project.

“We see demographic change growing exponentially. Working with schools that have a long history of educating multilingual learners will help us prepare our students at National Louis to be ready for it when they are in their own classrooms,” Nolan added.

Other partners include the Niles Township ELL Parent Center, which helps parents with limited proficiency in English navigate their children’s school systems; and the Illinois Resource Center,

which provides training and technical support for schools with ELL students.

The Multilingual STEM project has four main goals:

- Preparing and training teachers—including college students who are going into teaching—as well as college faculty and paraprofessionals to provide STEM instruction for ELL students.
- Helping more teachers to gain ELL certification before they enter the classroom.
- Developing ways to make data-based decisions about instruction for ELL students.
- Improving networking among school districts, teacher preparation faculty, paraprofessionals, and parents.

NLU will provide training to four groups of teachers from participating schools. The first group began in January and meets at Old Orchard Junior High School. Nolan stressed, “At some point, every teacher—not just the ELL teachers—is going to have to teach kids who speak different languages and who don’t speak English.”

“The ability to network with other districts that have the same diversity we do, that have the same set of challenges, is very powerful,” said Superintendent Frances McTague.

She noted that language diversity is increasing across the region. “We are very fortunate to have the university in our backyard to provide these resources,” McTague said. “To have a growing cohort of our teachers certified to teach ELLs is equally powerful and a great benefit of the grant.”



Teachers meet after school at Old Orchard Junior High for instruction on teaching ELL students about STEM subjects.

The project is expected to have a number of other results. Administrators will discuss ways to support their teachers as they teach growing numbers of ELL students. Parents who go through the ELL Parent Center will receive training that will enable them to become certified bilingual teaching assistants. Additionally, the Parent Center programs will be reviewed and evaluated to help them become more effective.

Technology brings author, students together

Suppose you're a teacher. You're teaching first-graders how to write a story and you'd like to have a real live published author talk to them about the tricks of the trade. Unfortunately, you have no budget for a personal appearance. What would you do?

Why not type the words "free author Skype" into Google and see what you come up with? That's what first-grade teachers Erin Haring, Megan Byrne, and Jeff Kaplan did, and their strategy paid off when author Kate Messner paid a virtual visit to their students at Jane Stenson School in November.

"We tell adults about this and they can't believe it. 'You talked to an author right there in your classroom?' They're more surprised than the kids," Kaplan said.

"We talk to students in class about the authors we read, but this gives them a chance to put a face to the name," Haring added. "Seeing an author on the screen and talking to her makes it real."

Many authors charge a fee to visit schools, but Kate Messner—a teacher herself—is an exception. Her website (www.katemessner.com) offers free 20-minute question-and-answer sessions via Skype, an Internet-based videoconferencing service.

In addition to books for children, Messner has written *Real Revision: Authors' Strategies to Share with Student Writers*, which lays out approaches to writing that work for her and other authors.

Before the author's visit, the first-graders read two of Messner's publications, a picture book called *Sea Monster's First Day* and a chapter book titled *Marty McGuire*.

The school had only one copy of *Marty McGuire*, so to get the students used to interacting with a person on a video screen, the teachers took turns reading it aloud in their own classroom while Skyping with the other two classes.

Students prepared for the session with Messner by discussing what they wanted to find out: How did you make a particular character? What's your writing process? Who else reads your stories? They



Kate Messner interacts with first graders in Erin Haring's class.

wrote down their questions and rehearsed them ahead of time.

On the day of the virtual visit, students from all three classes gathered in one classroom to view Messner on a screen speaking to them from New York, where she lives.

Messner explained that she keeps a notebook where she jots down ideas for stories. She showed them how she organizes ideas into categories. She told them it takes at least three months to work out the first draft of a story, then six to eight months to revise and polish it. And she said she works with an editor to make her writing better.

"The kids weren't too shy, and they took it seriously," Haring said. "And Kate Messner used language they could understand, so they seemed to get what she was telling them."

District elementary teachers use Writer's Workshop to help young writers. The approach emphasizes daily writing time, sharing work with the class, and getting feedback from other students. The classes hold "publishing parties" at the end of each writing unit to celebrate students' work. In the process, students begin to think of themselves as writers and to take their work seriously.

As principal Susan O'Neil explained, "Since we address our first-graders as authors themselves during writing time, the students were thrilled to get some insight from a 'fellow author.'"

IN BRIEF

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Board of Education meetings are held at 7:30 p.m. on the third Tuesday of each month in the Educational Service Center at 9440 Kenton Ave. You are invited to attend.

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

Applied Technology

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said. "This is a cutting-edge tool that's used by professionals in several industries. Getting their hands on it in junior high will help equip students who go into architecture, engineering and other fields."

Hawley stressed that Autodesk Inventor is a "real-world tool" and that the new program will provide hands-on experience in using it. Students might start by sketching an idea on paper, then work it out and refine it using a computer. At Niles North High School, there are tools they can use to produce a physical object based on the computerized model.

Hawley and Madans attended a regional confer-

ence where they learned how the PLTW program works and observed some representative lessons. They also have visited Niles North and several local junior high schools that received PLTW grants and have already begun the program.

According to Hawley, "When we visited other schools we saw kids who were engaged and excited. The teachers we've been talking to tell us it works. The kids buy into it."

"The teachers love it and the kids enjoy the challenge," Madans added. "This is a class where all students can be successful."

The new STEM program is part of District 68's overall push to prepare students for 21st century careers. It joins other recent additions at OOJH, such as the Project CARE program offered by Northwestern University and the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago to students in the gifted program, and the Reach for the Stars program, which places Northwestern graduate students in OOJH and other area schools.

"All in all, this makes for rich exposure to STEM programming for our students at the junior high," said Superintendent Frances McTague. "We feel excited about upgrading our program to improve instruction for all our students."

District 68 expects to hear about the grant from Project Lead the Way by early March.

A note for parents of private school students

If your child attends a private elementary school (K-8) and you reside within District 68, your school may be eligible for Title I funding through the federal government. Please contact Assistant Superintendent Laurie Heinz at (847) 676-9000 or lhein@skokie68.org, so she can contact your child's private school to discuss eligibility for this funding assistance.