The 9th Annual Delaware STEM Educator Awards
"Prioritizing STEM in the First State"

By Jan Castro



The 9th Annual Delaware STEM Educator Awards ceremony was hosted live at Buena Vista Country Estate in New Castle, Delaware on November 9th, 2023. Throughout the evening, six awards with accompanying unrestricted cash prizes of up to $7,500 were presented to individuals and teams of educators, from across the elementary through high school levels, for their accomplishments in STEM education.

The event was made possible by keynote sponsors Ashland and DuPont, as well as sponsors Agilent, LabWare, Mountaire Farms, and Walmart. The STEM Educator Awards are also an ongoing partnership between the Delaware STEM Council and the Delaware Foundation for Science and Mathematics Education (DFSME).

Delaware's elected representatives made appearances virtually to express gratitude and encouragement for the ongoing STEM Council and DFSME mission of celebrating and recognizing excellence in STEM education throughout the state.

Among them was Delaware Secretary of Education Dr. Mark Holodick, who extended the support of the Delaware Department of Education.

"Tonight is about not just celebrating the work of our STEM educators, but also sharing their stories," Dr. Holodick said. "Too often the great things happening in our schools don't get the recognition they deserve. So, to our celebrated educators I say, our community needs to hear your stories."

Governor John Carney also returned this year to greet ceremony attendees.

“As your governor, promoting innovation in Delaware is a top priority,” Carney said. “That starts with giving our students access to quality STEM education, provided by good teachers like you. Whenever I visit schools throughout Delaware, I’m always impressed by the enthusiasm I see from students in our STEM classrooms. This will have a big impact on the future success of our state.”

Senators Tom Carper and Chris Coons, corresponding virtually, displayed their support for the evening’s celebrated educators.

“As educators in STEM, you can well appreciate the innovation that must have been happening right where you are sitting, 178 years ago,” Carper said, referencing the prosperous agricultural estate once cultivated on the historic Buena Vista venue. “Perhaps John Clayton knew then what we know now, and that is that emphasizing STEM education in our curriculum is going to better prepare our society, and our planet, for tomorrow.”

“You’re together because you understand that the learners of today are the leaders of tomorrow,” Coons said. “Preparing our youth for a future that includes their active involvement in STEM sectors is no longer just a forward-thinking ‘good idea.’ As we witness the challenges facing humanity around the globe, these are the students who are going to lead us forward.”

Lieutenant Governor Bethany Hall-Long, an enduring supporter of the Delaware STEM Council and DFSME mission, was present at Buena Vista to personally congratulate award winners.

“I am a professor, a nurse, a research scientist first, always,” Hall-Long said, describing her own STEM background prior to entering her current political office. “STEM skills prepare us for a lifetime of success. I am very convinced that Delaware is going to be the number one place for folks to locate: The future of our workforce is the application of STEM.”

The presentation of awards began with the Certified Educators Awards. At the elementary school level, **Krista Bivins**, who has been an educator in the Smyrna School District for over a decade, was awarded first place.

In the middle school category, **Sarah Leonard** was awarded first place for her work as a 7th and 8th grade mathematics and science educator in the Appoquinimink School District. Second place was awarded to Seaford Middle School mathematics teacher **Tommie Polite**.

At the high school level, **Dr. Sharon L. Burke** received first place for her teaching efforts in anatomy, physiology, biology, and AP biology at Caesar Rodney High School

“This next award speaks to the African proverb, ‘It takes a village to raise a child,” DFSME board member P.J. Simon said, presenting the Community Educator Award. “The village, or the community, is where the people that are closest to you are: They encourage you, they nurture

you, they mentor you, and they prepare our children for the world. Community educators are part of that village."

The Community Educator Award was presented first to a team of AP Calculus AB and BC teachers from Padua Academy that included **Kelly Townsend, Sarah Smith,** and **Raymond Helie.** The second recipient of the award was **Todd Klawinski**, in recognizing his work as the Environmental Education Specialist for the Caesar Rodney School District, where he established the Caesar Rodney Center for Green Schools.

DFSME Executive Director Randy Guschl presented the following DFSME 2023 Jon Manon STEAM Award, which spotlights a team that has demonstrated outstanding collaborative efforts. The award went to a large team of educators across the science and mathematics departments at **Padua Academy**.

Lisa Blunt Rochester also greeted awardees and attendees later in the evening, praising teachers and connecting their efforts to the greater picture of industry and innovation in the First State.

"Each year I look forward to speaking to this esteemed group of teachers, because you are the leaders who are making the difference in the lives of our young people," Blunt Rochester said. "And as we stand on the brink of a great transformation – between the emergence of artificial intelligence and the development of immersive technology, STEM skills are more important than ever."

The evening concluded with a showcase of two student-driven programs which continue to take on the mantle of above-and-beyond STEM innovation at the high school level. One such program was The S.P.A.R.K.S. Project, which was founded by Charter School of Wilmington senior Sahaana Rajagopalan. The S.P.A.R.K.S. Project, which stands for Students Providing Awareness & Reach of Knowledge, is an organization that works to bridge the STEM education divide within the K-5 population.

Delaware STEM Council Executive Director Daniel Suchenski introduced Rajagopalan, who was present at Buena Vista to share more about her work in K-5 STEM education and advocacy.

"For me, personally, STEM isn't just about science; it's an interactive world with limitless possibilities, and I hope to continue to share that excitement with every child possible in an interactive manner," Rajagopalan said. "Instilling this passion and developing deep bonds with the children I work with has been super gratifying. I'm incredibly proud just watching their enthusiasm over simple concepts grow into a deep love for STEM and something they want to share with everyone."

The ceremony also recognized a team of Brandywine High School students that recently took home first place in the 2023 Samsung Solve for Tomorrow contest, an honor that was accompanied by a top cash prize of $100,000. The team, composed of Arun Krishnamurthy,

Anand John, Thomas Baer, Noah Fake and Gabe Pust, developed a low-cost alternative to an interface box that allows people with disabilities to more easily operate household appliances.

For further information and updates on upcoming events, or to learn more about the Delaware STEM Educator Awards, please visit the official Delaware STEM Council website. STEM educators can expect the application process for the 10th Annual STEM Educator Awards to open soon.

Lieutenant Governor Bethany Hall-Long, an enduring supporter of the DFSME mission, Honorary Chair of Million Women Mentors - Delaware (MWM-DE) and Co-Honorary Chair of MWM National, offered closing remarks:

"STEM skills prepare us for a lifetime of success…
The future of our Delaware workforce is the application of STEM."

The awards celebration was made possible by the evening's keynote sponsors **Ashland** and **DuPont**, as well as supporting sponsors **Agilent**, **LabWare**, **Mountaire** and **Walmart**.

Jan Castro is a writer, communications specialist, and University of Delaware alum who has been a proud student of Delaware educators.