Agriculture Stands Out at the 11th Annual STEM Educator Awards

By Willa Magland, Undergraduate Student, University of Delaware

The 11th annual STEM Educator Awards were held on November 13th, 2025, welcoming a variety of high-achieving Delaware educators with an unexpected emphasis on agricultural science. Held at the Buena Vista Estate in New Castle, Delaware, a total of eight awards were presented to fifteen recipients, recognizing their efforts in advancing STEM education at every grade level.

Along with the awards, the night saw congratulatory addresses from all of Delaware's national elected officials and multiple state leaders, including a keynote address by Delaware's own Secretary of Agriculture Don Clifton.

Clifton, who has over 45 years of experience in farming, spoke to the awardees "not as an educator, but as a consumer," stressing the critical role that STEM has played in the field of agriculture. He highlighted revolutionary technologies such as GPS-guided tractors, herbicides, and drones, which have enhanced the safety of both farmers and consumers. Clifton also applauded the council's emphasis on diversity, equality, and opportunity.

"Innovation," Clifton said, "comes from people like you, who are not satisfied with the status quo. People like you, who understand that what we currently know, and how we produce today, are not the best that human beings can attain."

The STEM Educator Awards is a yearly joint effort between the Delaware STEM Council and the Delaware Foundation for Science and Mathematics Education (DFSME). The Governors Delaware STEM Council created from an executive order in 2010, the Council works to expand and diversify Delaware's STEM workforce, attract STEM industry and opportunity, and elevate STEM literacy for all Delawareans. The Council works closely with DFSME, a business-community-government partnership that advocates for high-quality STEM education across Delaware.

The Educator Awards are divided into two categories: the certified and the community awards, each having subsections for elementary, middle, and high school levels of recognition. The certified awards recognize licensed k-12 STEM educators' achievements at Delaware's public and charter schools, while the community awards focus on outside-of-the-classroom efforts by community members and organizations in advancing STEM education. Each award includes an unrestricted cash prize of $7,500.

The certified first-place award for elementary school was given to Maria Cobbs, a third grade STEM teacher at the Brandywine school district in Wilmington. Cobbs has played a vital role in innovating STEM education at Mount Pleasant elementary school, where she developed a cross-grade mentorship program, and has had a district-wide impact through her educational website and YouTube videos.

"To my students: keep asking questions, keep building, keep imagining what's possible, because the future is bright," Cobbs said. "STEM is bright, because it is in your hands."

The next to be recognized was Eric Kraus, who was awarded second-place for the certified elementary school category. Blowing a kiss to his mom and dad, Kraus thanked his family and colleagues for supporting him over the years. A related arts and STEM teacher at the Nellie Stokes Elementary School, Kraus told the story of how his small coding club of eighteen students blossomed into a school-wide STEM education initiative.

One memorable moment for Kraus was when a student was able to program a Micro Bit computer to play the school's alma mater and presented it in front of the superintendent.

"And that was one of those little sparks for the whole thing," Kraus said. "The kids like it, and we're showing the entire district something new is going on at our school."

Taking home the Certified Educator Award for middle school, Nichol Carrol emphasized Sec. Clifton's focus on agricultural science. A teacher of computer applications and agricultural science at Stanton Middle School, Carrol leads the district's only career and technical education program, and had previously developed a nationally recognized agricultural science curriculum for high schools.

Carrol said that this year, Stanton Middle School will be the first middle school to be connected with University of Delaware, with the aim to enhance STEM education for students of diverse backgrounds.

"This new opportunity for our Red Clay students not only touches agriculture, but intertwines STEM in their lives every single day," Carrol said.

The certified first-place award for the high school category went to Michelle Thomas. Teaching chemistry and dual enrollment anatomy and physiology at Sussex Technical High School, Thomas is an eight-time Delaware Science Olympiad Coach of the Year and mentor for the school's science journal club.

Through a partnership with the Van Andel Institute, journal club members meet monthly with real scientists and develop research projects that they present at local science fairs and the Van Andel Institute's own event.

The second-place winner for the certified high school award was Matthew Pecorella, a physics and chemistry teacher at St. George's Technical High School. Pecorella crafted and implemented the school's STEM curriculum, where he focuses on making physics and chemistry feel real to his students. He does this through hands-on projects applicable to their career goals, including redesigning bridges, boats, cars, and flashlights.

"At our school, STEM isn't something that happens during a lab period or a project or a week," Pecorella said. "It's a lived experience with our students every single day."

The awards were presented by co-hosts Carolmarie Brown and Vere Archibald, representing longtime sponsors Ashland and DuPont, respectively. Other sponsors that made the Educator Awards possible this year include Agilent, Mountaire Farms, LabWare, the Delaware chapter of the American Chemical Society, Croda, Insight, Autumn Arch, Bloom Energy, and Walmart.

The ceremony continued with the Community Educator Awards, highlighting two major players in advancing STEM education in the community. The recipient for the elementary community award was Deanna Bledsoe, the founder of Kai Coders, a program focused on making technology education accessible to students. Named after her daughter, Bledsoe said that Kai Coders seeks to teach students confidence, creativity, and kindness through working with computers.

"We remind kids every day that computers are not the smart ones, that they are the smart ones," Bledsoe said.

The middle school Community Educator award went to Junior Achievement of Delaware and was accepted by Rob Eppes. Founded in 1956, Junior Achievement of Delaware has helped middle school students make informed career decisions regarding their high school pathways. The organization developed the Pathway to Your Dreams software, which allows students to explore career options, hoping to expand and diversify the STEM workforce in Delaware.

The final award to be announced was the Jon Manon STEAM Team Educators Award. Funded by an anonymous donor, the $1,000 cash award recognizes a select team of teachers whose

collaboration has furthered STEM in their school community. Jon Manon, a math and STEM educator and board president for DFSME, said that he has come to believe that the best learning happens through collaborative efforts.

“Too often, we tend to herald single scientists or mathematicians or politicians, and not understand that it's always collaborative,” Manon said. “It's always about collaboration.”

The 2025 Jon Manon STEAM Team Educators Award was presented by DFSME executive director Randolph Guschl to MOT Charter High School for their interdisciplinary teamwork in developing a STEM career-readiness capstone program. Partnering with over thirty organizations, the program allows teams of students to complete a STEAM project associated with their interests, which they eventually present to a panel of STEM professionals.

Speaking on behalf of his team, Brian Hurd thanked the MOT Charter administration, teachers, and students for their support of the program.

To close off the evening, STEM council Executive Director Daniel Suchenski offered one final congratulations to the award winners, and thanked the businesses, organizations, and partners that helped make the awards possible. In one final surprise, he thanked the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, which generously provided DNREC park passes to all of the night's awardees. He encouraged those interested in applying in future years to visit https://delawarestem.org/ for more information.

This article was written by Willa Magland, an undergraduate student at the University of Delaware, who is majoring in history and English.