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District 65 Summer Camps Inspire Next Generation of Scientists

By Anna Sanders

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Forget morning cartoons and water parks: Evanston and Skokie students resist the lazy days of summer through District 65's STEM – science, technology, engineering and mathematics - summer camps. Campers from the first sessions of Students Using Science and Technology to Find Solutions (SSTS) program and the summer Robotics Camp demonstrated their work in an open house at the Joseph Hill Education Center on July 8.

In its second year, SSTS includes seventh and eighth graders recommended by principals and teachers based on their interest for performing scientific research. For three weeks, campers observe the North Shore Channel, develop a hypothesis and test their theories through experiments.

After noting the presence of dragonflies near the channel, for example, King Lab student Lauren Ho said her group wanted to find out if the water in the channel needed to have a certain pH level for dragonflies to live there. She added that the program is "awesome."

"It revolves around the fact that it's student-driven," Chute Middle School teacher and SSTS counselor Mike Roche said. He added the students "just light up" during the camp.

King Lab School teacher Jennifer Tobey said SSTS is a unique program. "I like seeing how excited kids get about wildlife," Ms. Tobey said. She added that parents are "really thrilled" about the program so far.

Patty Tzortzis, coordinator of Instructional Technology in the District's Information Services Department, said this year the District expanded beyond SSTS to include the free Robotics Camp, open to fifth- through eighth-graders.

Incoming Nichols Middle School sixth-graders Bunbev Sawhney and Sam Molian-Wong built a robot programmed to hit a ball. "It's like a batting cage," Bunbev said. "Some sensor senses the balls," he said, and then the sensor then causes the robot to swing its "bat." "I wanted to build a machine gun," Sam said, adding he and Bunbev decided on the batting cage after finding out guns were not part of the program.



Incoming Nichols Middle School sixth-graders Bunbev Sawhney and Sam Molian-Wong with their robot, which is programmed to hit a ball after sensing its movement, at the July 8 Open House.

Kingsley Elementary School teacher Jarod Johnson said that campers work with Lego Mindstorm robots. After completing a tutorial, campers then follow instructions to build various robots. The kids program them to perform certain tasks or challenges using sensors and data gathering tools. "They assemble robots and have them do stuff," he said. "We mostly worked on challenges."

Mr. Johnson described one such challenge: After assembling a wheeled robot, campers had to program the robot to navigate a course using a light sensor, which would follow a dark line on an otherwise white course.

Robotics camp counselor Julie Ulmen said campers worked hard. "They're really engaged and excited about it," she said.

Ms. Tzortzis said SSTS and the Robotics Camp are part of a district-wide effort to introduce students to STEM education. "Through projects we're trying to make sure kids have exposure to these areas," she said.

Ms. Tzortzis said her favorite part about the program is the overall excitement of the participating students and teachers. "They were so excited to be learning in a creative manner," she said. "Kids love going to the camps."

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