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Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh schools going full STEAM ahead

April 8, 2015 11:16 PM
By Eleanor Chute / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

What started as an effort to save a tiny Pittsburgh school has led to a new program emphasizing STEAM — science, technology, engineering, arts and math — in several schools, with opportunities for teachers throughout the district to develop innovative projects.

The Pittsburgh Public Schools board was considering closing the district's smallest school, Pittsburgh Woolslair PreK-5 in Bloomfield, which had 110 students, for fall 2015, but a new board gave the school a reprieve. Woolslair supporters developed a new plan for the school, a STEAM magnet, which could attract students from throughout the city.

In September, the board approved plans to make Woolslair a partial STEAM magnet this fall and to use the program to enhance Pittsburgh Lincoln PreK-5, Schiller 6-8 and the bio-technology program at Perry High School.

But a key remaining piece of the puzzle was how to pay for the STEAM programs. At a news conference Wednesday at Schiller, the district announced foundations are donating nearly $900,000 for the STEAM programs $480,000 from the Grable Foundation and $391,000 from the Fund for Excellence, a consortium of foundations.

Now schoolwide STEAM programs for Wooslair, Lincoln and Schiller will move forward. The Perry program will be planned over the next school year.

In addition, teachers throughout the district will be able to seek mini-grants for innovative projects. The details of that are not available yet.

Shaun Tomaszewski, district STEAM coordinator, said the program will be across the curriculum, and he hopes to have one extensive module per grade level each nine weeks.

He said the district plans to hire two STEAM teachers, one for Lincoln and Woolslair, and the other for Schiller, who will lead a lab at the schools and help teachers collaborate on projects.

Each school also will have a STEAM lab. Those are still being designed, but each will have enough sinks for washing hands, solid surfaces for working and movable furniture.

At the news conference, students displayed one of six STEAM projects they worked on this school year. In this project, students worked in teams to build a dam to hold back water inside a

plastic shoe box with limited materials, including a sponge, a plastic sandwich bag, sand and a few other items.

Schiller principal Paula Heinzman said that students were so engaged in their STEAM projects that it changed cafeteria conversations from social talk to talk about design when the projects were underway.

Schiller eighth-grader Hussein Haji of Perrysville said the STEAM projects have helped to make this his favorite year at Schiller.

He said Schiller becoming a STEAM school "has caused most kids to be more innovative because using the same old methods and ideas won't always work, so you have to look at things as if there are no limits."

First Published April 8, 2015 11:53 AM