

New science program debuts at Worcester's Burncoat Street Prep

BY SCOTT O'CONNELL / TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF / SEPTEMBER 17, 2015

WORCESTER – Whatever was supposed to come out of the graduated cylinder on the table in front of him, Evan Wini was not expecting an eruption of what looked like an oversized column of toothpaste.

“What I thought it would do is bubble a bit and go up slightly,” he said of the “Elephant toothpaste” experiment – the introduction of potassium iodide to a mixture of dish soap and hydrogen peroxide. “But it just exploded.”

In other words, it was maybe more fun than the fifth-grader, and about two dozen other students in the room with him at Burncoat Street Preparatory School Thursday morning, were expecting. That’s the idea of the Science from Scientists program, a Boston-based school enrichment program that launched its first Worcester location at Burncoat this year.

Founded by MIT graduate Erika Ebbel Angle, Science from Scientists brings real scientists to participating schools, where they have 90-minute science sessions with students. The overall goal, Ms. Angle said at a kickoff ceremony for the Burncoat program Thursday morning, is to make science less of a chore and more of a thrill.

“Growing up, I was fortunate to have positive experiences with science,” she said, which set her on a track to pursue a successful career in the field. But not every student gets that same opportunity, she added – “Science never came to life during elementary school and middle school as it did for me. And I thought about that – who will be my doctor in 15 years? Who will fly the airplane I’m in?”

The Elephant toothpaste experiment, which Evan conducted along with fellow Burncoat fifth-graders De’janique Waller and Daneishka Gutierrez under the direction of Science from Scientists instructor Amanda Schutt, is just one example of the types of experiments students at the school will do in the program. Burncoat’s visiting scientists, which include

a researcher from UMass Medical School and a graduate student in physics, are scheduled to be at the school once every two weeks – roughly 18 times this school year.

Another program is slated to start at Chandler Magnet School next week as well, said Payal Patel, who is the Science from Scientists director for Worcester. The city’s programs are being funded through a two-year STEM Pipeline grant the organization received from the state’s department of higher education, she said.

“The idea is to bring in the program, and see how the students, teachers and principals like it,” she said. “Hopefully, if there’s enough interest, the district will say, ‘we need to bring this to more schools.’”

It’s no secret by now that Massachusetts has been making a major push to expand and improve STEM – science, technology, engineering and math – education in schools the past few years. State officials have said the initiative is critical not just to the success of students, who are more likely to find rewarding, well-paying careers in the fields, but also to the future of the state’s high-tech economy, which will need well-trained, specialized workers.

Lt. Gov. Karyn E. Polito, who attended Thursday’s event at Burncoat, said it’s especially important to get girls more interested in science.

“I worry about them – as they grow a little older, they tend to say things like, ‘Oh, I’m not good at math, I don’t really like science,’” she said. “The point of today is you have to know science and math, and if you have to know it, then you should love it.”

She didn’t need to convince Evan, who said he’s already thinking of becoming a scientist.

“I’m having trouble (deciding) what kind,” he said, after Thursday’s experiment. “But this is kind of fun.”

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From left, Science from Scientists Worcester Director Payal Patel, Science from Scientists founder Erika Ebbel Angle (in red), Burncoat fifth-grader Evan Wini, Superintendent Melinda Boine, Burncoat fifth-grader Daneishka Gutierrez, Worcester Chief Academic Officer Herro Rodriguez, and Burncoat fifth-grader De'janique Waller. T&G Staff/Scott O'Connell

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