

PALESTINE ISD: DEFINING TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY LEARNING



By Larissa Loveless, Director of Public Relations, Palestine ISD

The twenty-first century has brought great changes for learning and what is learned. Education has witnessed and responded as the Age of Industrialization has ended and the Technology Age has exploded. Palestine Independent School District has met the challenges of preparing students to be competitive and competent in a global economy with rapidly changing career options. A culture of confidence, curiosity, and success link students as they employ critical thinking skills and discovery with the support of teachers, through the nationally acclaimed Project Lead the Way curriculum. Exploration learning is extended with VEX robotics. A foundation is laid on Northside Elementary campus as gears and systems are mastered. VEX robotics competitions are the ultimate STEM experience for students beginning at Story Intermediate and continuing to Palestine High School.

Palestine ISD's journey to implementing and integrating STEM classes and the STEM philosophy began five years ago at Palestine Junior High. The journey has certainly had diversions and road blocks, but the district and its students arrived at an amazing destination this Spring, the U.S. Open Vex Robotics National Championship. VEX Robotics competition is founded by the Robotics Education & Competition Foundation. Each year VEX presents a competition challenge to student competitors. As students rise to the challenge presented they must be skillful in their critical thinking, content knowledge, and teamwork to successfully create a unique and innovatively designed robot. The fun begins as the robots score points for the team in qualifying matches, elimination matches, and skills challenges.

History was made in Palestine ISD as Mr. Joseph Baker's students captured two VEX tournament championships in the Killen competition this past December. Team 8601D members were Grace Butler, Ryan Jenkins, and Wesley Henderson. Team 8601E members were Nick Clewis-Jones, Giovanni Gonzalez, and David Retana. Students competed against thirty-five teams from throughout the state. Reflecting on the twist and turns to a big victory in his Palestine Herald Press interview, David Retana recalls a shaky beginning. "At first it started out bad. We didn't have our key that connects the robot to the remote so we had borrow it, but then things turned around. We started winning matches and meeting people and it was really interesting." According to their instructor and mentor, Mr. Baker, countless hours of planning goes into the VEX robotics challenge. Programming is required and then the planning and programming must be implemented with the hardware. The level of competition and work ethic of all participants at each level of competition is intense. Mr. Baker feels the success of his teams can be attributed to their timing and teamwork. Without all three team members performing at their very best the job will not get done at the level required of the competition according to Mr. Baker.

When asked to define his proudest moment of competition, Mr. Baker surprisingly does not reference having two teams qualify for a highly competitive national event. Instead, he quickly recounts the growth of the robotics program but also includes how he has seen students grow in their life skills. He witnesses dedicated and determined students work on projects for hours beyond the required school day. He



Summer learning at Curious Museum with Northside Elementary Summer learning.



Northside Elementary Summer learning at Curious museum.



Northside Elementary students with STEM activities.

sees them face challenges and adversity and apply skills they have learned in a variety of academic areas to create their own success.

Palestine High School Robotics VEX competitors were already big winners prior to leaving for Council Bluffs, Iowa and the national competition in early April. Upon arriving, they joined 200 robotics teams from across the United States as well as teams from Canada and China. Intense levels of competition coupled with a prevailing attitude of perfection did not deter PHS competitors as they moved through the majority the day, maintaining a third place ranking. Structural issues with the team's robot caused a quick plummet in the teams standing. Team 8601E concluded the prestigious event placing 66 out of the 200 other teams. Team 8601D finished with a ranking of 175.

Palestine High School Robotics teams have successfully taken a district's elusive pursuit of STEM learning and made it a tangible reality. They have defined phrases such as global learner, career ready, integrated curriculum, hands on learning, and STEM with their processes, their actions and their amazing achievements. Team members confirm Palestine ISD's approach to educating students for a competitive and rapidly changing world is on target. Their faces glow as they begin to share their aspirations to continue to learn and explore in the fields of computer science, software engineering, electronic engineering, computer software engineering and video game design.



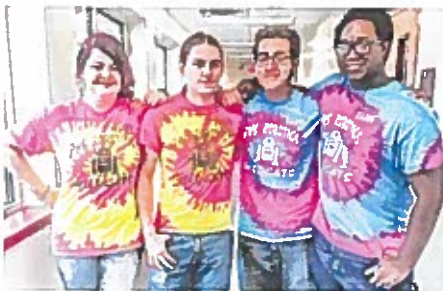
Superintendent Jason Marshall and Story Intermediate VEX Robotics Instructor Virgil Buell.



Story Intermediate Students with VEX Robotics design.



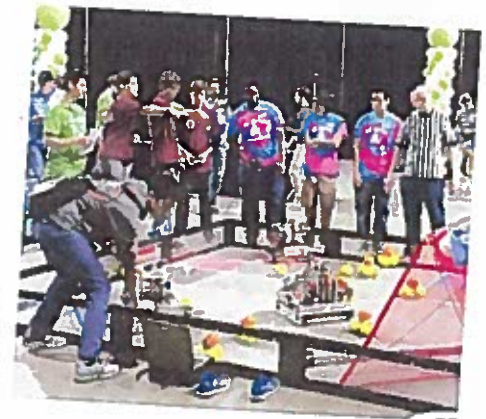
In Black: Grace Butler, Coy Jenkins, Wesely Henderson, Giovanni Gonzales, David Retana, Nicholas Clewis-Jones



Grace Butler, Coy (Ryan) Jenkins, David Retana, Nicholas Clewis-Jones



National Competition



PHS Robotics program accomplishments:

- 2013-14 SkillsUSA Texas District 5 Champions Robotics
- 2013-14 SkillsUSA Texas State Qualifiers Robotics
- 2014-15 SkillsUSA Texas District 5 Champions Robotics
- 2014-15 SkillsUSA Texas State Qualifiers Robotics
- 2014-15 VEX Robotic North Texas Regional Qualifiers
- 2015-16 Killeen Texas Shoemaker High School Vex NBN Tournament Champs
- 2015-16 South Texas Vex Robotics Regional Qualifiers
- 2015-16 U.S. Open VEX Robotics Championships Qualifiers