Glen Ridge FIRST builds interest in science, technology - NorthJersey.com

Ridgewood Avenue School is usually fairly quiet during winter break in February.

A group of students in the Glen Ridge FIRST Intro to Robotics class poseswith their robots on Friday at Ridgewood Avenue School. In the back, from left are Drew Ege, 11; Aiden Hackett, 8 and Jackson Champeau, 8. In front are Olivia Hoover, 8; Andrew Snyder, 8, Alex Dreier, 9 and Anwell Meng, 8.

ERIN ROLL/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Buy or license this photo
A group of students in the Glen Ridge FIRST Intro to Robotics class poseswith their robots on Friday at Ridgewood Avenue School. In the back, from left are Drew Ege, 11; Aiden Hackett, 8 and Jackson Champeau, 8. In front are Olivia Hoover, 8; Andrew Snyder, 8, Alex Dreier, 9 and Anwell Meng, 8.

But not this year.

On a recent Friday morning, the school cafeteria has turned into a robotics laboratory.

Down on the floor, several of the scientists and engineers - all of them elementary school students - are trying out their robots by pitting them in battle against one another.

"On your mark! Get set! Battle!"

With that, the robots go rolling toward one another, each one trying to bump the other off course.

Welcome to Glen Ridge FIRST: a series of science and technology programs for Glen Ridge's students.

This particular class is the Intro to Robotics course, where students get to learn the basics of assembling a Lego robot, from fitting the pieces together to inserting the battery-powered motors.

In a separate course, the students get to learn about the software - how to program their robot to carry out certain tasks.

About FIRST

FIRST is an acronym for For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology. Glen Ridge's FIRST program is an offshoot of the national FIRST program.

The program was started in 1989 by inventor and entrepreneur Dean Kamen - also known as the inventor of the Segway, among other devices.

The goal of FIRST is to get children interested in science, technology, engineering and mathematics - known collectively as the STEM courses.

It also offers students the opportunity to participate in challenges and contests, from the Jr. FIRST Lego

League for younger students, to the FIRST Robotics Competition for high school students.

first in glen ridge

Glen Ridge has started assembling its own Jr. FIRST Lego League teams, and as of last week, the league had 12 registered teams. The participating students will hold an exhibition event at Linden Avenue School on Feb. 28, the same day as the school's science fair.

The impetus for Glen Ridge FIRST came from parents Yin Chang-D'Arcy and Kim McGuire.

Both Chang-D'Arcy and McGuire have children who are interested in building and programming.

"Everything we saw was outside of Glen Ridge," Chang-D'Arcy said.

It also didn't help that certain robotics classes would have required a 40-minute drive, Chang-D'Arcy noted. So she and McGuire, working with other parents, decided to set up a FIRST chapter based in Glen Ridge.

FIRST's offerings range from introductory classes for elementary school students, to more advanced classes for middle and high school students. Each class can be modified for a student's own abilities, Chang-D'Arcy noted.

Over the next several months, Glen Ridge FIRST plans to start up FIRST Lego League teams for older students, and expand the program to let students from neighboring towns participate, among other goals.

"It is a wonderful adjunct to our program," Superintendent of Schools John Mucciolo said via email on Monday. "Other communities are also doing this with great success. I do everything I can to support this program."

Ridgewood Principal Michael Donovan also had words of support for Glen Ridge FIRST: "We appreciate the tremendous efforts being made by Yin D'Arcy and Kim McGuire as they have established the Glen Ridge FIRST program. They have brought unique opportunities into Glen Ridge, and the students who have been participating have thoroughly enjoyed their experiences."

To learn more about Glen Ridge FIRST, visit http://glenridgefirst.wordpress.com/.

Email: roll@northjersey.com

North Jersey Media Group Inc.