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Renowned Idaho STEM teachers earn INDEEDS awards

BOISE, Idaho (Oct. 22, 2021) — The Idaho STEM Action Center has honored two educators who champion science, technology, engineering, and mathematics and connect students with industry leaders to mentor projects and provide invaluable career guidance. A panel of industry experts selected Boise teacher Dr. Kellie Taylor and West Ada teacher Sarah Oosterhuis to receive the 2021 Industry’s Excellent Educators Dedicated to STEM awards, or INDEEDS for short.

“STEM education is a critical part of ensuring the next generation of Idaho citizens is equipped with the skills Idaho businesses need in their workers,” Idaho Gov. Brad Little said. “Congratulations to these two outstanding teachers for leading in the area of STEM education and preparing our students so well for lifelong learning.”

The accolades were announced during the Idaho Technology Council Hall of Fame & Resilience Showcase Thursday night. Visit the STEM Action Center’s YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/c/IdahoSTEMActionCenter or <https://youtu.be/QD6tludTnXQ> directly to watch the awards presentation video that streamed live during the virtual event.

Dr. Taylor, the winner in the kindergarten through sixth-grade category, is a GATE (gifted and talented education) teacher working with second- and third-grade students in the classroom at Hawthorne Elementary School in Boise and with third- through sixth-graders in an after-school robotics program. She has taught primary school and STEM education in the Treasure Valley since 2004, and recently served as an Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellow conducting educational outreach for the Library of Congress.

A robotics and space education champion — she even arranged for her students to complete a satellite launch experimental device for NASA and they’re slated to talk with astronauts on the International Space Station — Dr. Taylor seeks to create greater access to STEM education and career opportunities for females, minorities, and low-income students.

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“STEM is all around us,” Dr. Taylor said. “We’re consuming it or using it, whether it’s through our cell phones or devices. We are part and parcel with STEM whether we realize it or not. STEM education is important because we can teach students to be creators rather than just consumers. Our connection with technology is only going to grow and we want to create students that can embrace that, grow it, and move with it, because without that you’re going to be left behind.”

Oosterhuis, the INDEEDS Awards winner in the seventh- through 12th-grade category, concurs.

“We live in a world where technology is lending us a hand at every turn,” Oosterhuis said. “If we’re in the kitchen or on the football field or a launch pad with a rocket that’s headed to Mars, humans keep figuring out ways to make better tech. The trick is how we can equitably and ethically design, build, and maintain this complex world. I believe the answer lies in building a strong foundation in our K-12 schools, creating a pipeline into STEM education and careers that reflect the needs and diversity of the world we live in. Creating a high-quality STEM foundation is not only key to a competitive labor market and economy, but also to a more harmonious and equitable society in which all citizens have access to high-quality and relevant education and thereby careers.”

Oosterhuis has taught engineering at Renaissance High School in Meridian since 2008 and serves as an adjunct instructor at Northwest Nazarene University and University of Idaho, offering college credit opportunities to high school students. She has served as a Technology Student Association advisor for 11 of her 13 years in education, providing growth opportunities for engineering and technology students beyond the classroom. She also has served on the advisory board of the Idaho Technology Students Association for the last five years, first as secretary from 2016-2019 and since then as vice president.

Dr. Kaitlin Maguire, executive director of the STEM Action Center, said both teachers integrate industry interaction into their lesson plans to ensure students develop the knowledge and skillsets Idaho employers need.

“Connecting real-world applications to learning experiences helps students understand the importance of what they are learning,” Dr. Maguire said. “Kellie and Sarah are exceptional educators who recognize and do this on a regular basis by being mindful of the need to bring their communities and industry into their classrooms. And their enthusiasm and passion for STEM are inspiring.”

Both educators will receive checks for \$2,000 and up to \$2,000 more to attend any STEM-related national conference, plus their schools will receive \$2,000 each to fund science, technology, engineering, and math initiatives. The STEM Action Center, Vynyl, Battelle Energy Alliance, the Micron Foundation, the Discovery Center of Idaho, and the Idaho Technology Council are providing the prize package.

Dr. Maguire said STEM, including digital literacy, is crucial to Idaho's continued prosperity.

"Nineteen of Idaho's 20 hot jobs through 2026 require STEM skills, and within a decade 90 percent of jobs will require digital literacy," Dr. Maguire said. "STEM jobs pay about twice as much as non-STEM jobs, and furthermore, among Idaho parents who were surveyed, 99 percent believe STEM skills will play an important role in the future.

"STEM skills set students up for success as creative thinkers who find solutions for a brighter future. It helps develop critical thinking, problem solving, innovation, and collaboration skills, and these durable skills are invaluable even if they don't pursue a career in STEM."

About the Idaho STEM Action Center

The Idaho STEM Action Center was created in 2015 because Idaho citizens are not entering the STEM pipeline fast enough to meet current and future Idaho workforce needs. Its goals are to increase equitable access to STEM opportunities, align education and workforce needs, and amplify awareness of STEM throughout Idaho. The organization is working with industry, government, educators, and students to develop new resources and support high-quality professional-development opportunities to foster a STEM-educated workforce that ensures Idaho's continued economic prosperity.

Visit STEM.idaho.gov for more information, and visit <https://STEM.idaho.gov/support-us/foundation> to make a tax-deductible donation to the Idaho STEM Action Center Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, to enhance the investment the state has made in Idaho's STEM community. Contributions provide greater access to STEM camps for children, student competitions, and many other life-shaping programs.

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