



September 12, 2011

## **Niles North Science Teachers Win First-Ever ISTA Award; Team Honored for Reaching Critical Mass in Teaching and Learning**

Skokie, IL -- The Illinois Science Teachers Association (ISTA) announced today that the Niles North High School Science team is the first-ever winner of its **Excellence in Science School Award**. The new award recognizes excellence in science teaching and learning at the school building level. It was designed to recognize schools whose Science teachers embody a special creativity and dedication in their work, developing a solid understanding of science for their students.

ISTA Past President Gwen Pollock and ISTA member Rita Januszyk, a teacher at Gower West Elementary School in Willowbrook, presented the award to the Niles North Science teachers at the Sept. 12 Niles Township High School District 219 Board of Education meeting in Skokie. Januszyk came up with the idea for the award.

“What a privilege it was for me to read the application and see the video about the excellent science going on at Niles North High School,” Januszyk said. “Niles North embodies an excellence in science instruction across a school with all members fully engaged in a collective vision of what is best for teaching and learning science. As the first award recipients of the ISTA Excellence in Science Award, Niles North High School sets a high standard and example that we hope will serve as a blueprint and inspiration for schools across the state.”

The ISTA Excellence in Science award program is built on the concept of **Critical Mass**. Critical Mass describes the contributions of each member of the school’s team, all working toward achieving a common goal associated with success in the sciences for their students. Critical Mass depends on the special talents and skills of each member, realizing that the success of science teaching and learning is a shared, common responsibility of the teachers, administrators and the larger school community.

Niles North’s award application was spearheaded by Science teacher Suzy Trzaskus. Other members of the Critical Mass Team are: Mike Beeftink, Christine Camel, Ingrid Erickson, Brad Greenspan, John Kretsos, Lisa McKenna, Gina Milanesio, Conrad Musleh, Jacki Naughton, Scott Reed and R.J. Thielsen.

“The Niles North High School Science Department is a wonderful place to work,” Trzaskus said. “From my first days as a new teacher I have been supported and inspired to be the best science educator I could become. When ISTA announced

this award I believed that we could win and that everyone in the department would be willing to participate. My colleagues have always been at the forefront of pedagogy and content. We work together to try out new ideas and make them better. The critical mass team was diverse in content and pedagogy and did an excellent job representing what we do best, getting students excited to learn science.”

The award application required both a written narrative and videotaped testimonies from Critical Mass Team members explaining how the teachers collaborate within a carefully designed curricular framework to foster student inquiry and incorporate technology into teaching and learning. The application required teachers to provide concrete examples of how they:

- Design curriculum to plan for continual refinements, model scientific inquiry for students and incorporate technology as a tool for learning science.
- Develop assessment for learning standards and identify indicators of student success based on individual student growth.
- Work with each other and with the administration to maximize school resources, develop goals for future progress in the Science department and develop a culture of Critical Mass among teachers to continue to raise standards of teaching and learning.
- Develop the expectation that the Science teachers will continue to pursue excellence through professional development, integrate Common Core Standards in their curriculum, advance Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) in their individual lesson plans and continue to engage in educational research.
- Establish connections with the school’s Professional Learning Community (PLC) by working with teachers in other disciplines and fostering science experiences within and beyond the classroom, through field trips, outside speakers, community partnerships, after-school activities, working with parents, and other strategies.

United States Gypsum, or USG, whose world headquarters are in Chicago, sponsored the award. “ISTA is grateful to USG Corporation for its generous support of the Excellence in Science School Award,” Pollock said.

Because a key goal of the ISTA award is to encourage professional development, the organization has arranged for the Niles North Critical Mass Team to present at the Illinois Science Education Conference on Oct. 28 at the Tinley Park Conference Center.

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