

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Thursday, Dec. 22, 2016

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Chatterton Middle School robotics team wins first place in state championship semifinals

Robotics team headed to super regional competition in Iowa in March

WARREN, Mich. — A **Chatterton Middle School** robotics team won first place in the semifinals at the *FIRST* robotics state championship in Battle Creek last weekend. The team, the ChatterBolts, team 9572, competed against an equally competitive team in the finals and took second place, qualifying them to advance. The **Fitzgerald Public Schools** students are now headed to the super regional competition in Iowa March 29-31.

“Robotics allows students to learn STEM concepts in a fun and engaging way, and these skills can be applied across multiple disciplines,” said science and robotics teacher **Sharon Sylvester**, who advises the robotics club and teaches the brand-new robotics classes. “The robotics projects encourage hard work, innovation and idea sharing, and expose students to the excitement of real-world engineering while helping them hone the creative problem-solving skills needed for the high-tech jobs of the future.”

The *FIRST* robotics program helps students strengthen their skills in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, or STEM. It also reinforces what *FIRST* refers to as “Gracious Professionalism,” whereby participants offer assistance, display positive attitudes toward their competitors and extend their skills, knowledge and kindness toward everyone.

“The success of the Fitzgerald Public Schools robotics teams speaks to the strength of our robotics program, Ms. Sylvester’s dedication to the robotics class, and students’ enthusiasm for learning and innovation,” said Superintendent **Barbara VanSweden**. “Fitzgerald Public Schools produces powerhouse teams at both the middle and high school levels, thanks to our diverse STEM offerings. This program continues to grow in popularity.”

Chatterton Middle School offers both a robotics club and robotics classes. A robotics club also exists at the high school level, and the growing interest may lead to the creation of a robotics class in the future.

Each robotics team has 10 or more members, and many schools across the country — Chatterton included — have more than one team due to the high level of interest in the program. The Chatterton teams, the ChatterBots 9496 and ChatterBolts 9572, have climbed the ranks quickly since the program’s inception almost three years ago. The teams placed fourth in the local division their first year, second last year and first this year, clinching a spot at the state championship.

Many of the students have put in nearly 300 hours beyond the time they spend in school working on their robot. Schoolwork remains a top priority that must be completed prior to working on robotics. The students have a strong support system between Sylvester and their teammates. Most of the students are also members of the Chatterton Junior Honor Society that Sylvester also developed and co-sponsors.

“I want to give my students the opportunity to become competitive in the marketplace once they graduate, and the classes I teach lay the groundwork for their future success,” Sylvester said. “I am working hard to obtain grant funding to purchase a 3D printer and incorporate CAD and 3D printing into the curriculum. It will be amazing to see a student go from prototype, to CAD design, to actually printing parts for their robots. I hope to incorporate technology in my classroom that is being used on the forefront of the industry today.”

The *FIRST* Robotics Competition is sponsored by *FIRST* (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology), an international youth organization that was founded in 1989 by the inventor of the Segway Human Transporter. The competition was launched to motivate young people to pursue educational experiences and career opportunities related to STEM. *FIRST* also provides \$18 million in college scholarships to support more than 900 students.

Each year, *FIRST* creates a new challenge for teams participating in the *FIRST* Tech Challenge. The challenge is revealed in September, and teams have about eight weeks to design and build their robot. The teams enter their robot in local and regional

competitions, and the competition eventually culminates in the *FIRST* Super Regional Championship in March. Teams that win this championship round then advance to the world competition.

Through the robotics club, students get to apply real-world math and science concepts to design, build, program and operate robots. The collaborative projects help students build problem-solving, teamwork and leadership skills. At competitions, the students form alliances with other teams to complete a designated set of challenges that earn points for the team. The challenges have specific tasks the robots must complete. This year, teams had to design robots that could lift a yoga ball over 60 inches to cap a center vortex, shoot softball-sized whiffle balls into the same center vortex, and press a button that will change the light color on a beacon to the team's corresponding color, red or blue.

Sylvester has an expansive vision for her role as a teacher of robotics. Her next goals include using the 3D printer to design, print, program and build a working artificial limb, developing underwater robots that can also be taken to competitions, and learning how to use drones for search and rescue missions.

As the Chatterton team advances to higher levels of competition, the participation costs increase. Individuals and local businesses are encouraged to join the growing list of sponsors who are supporting the robotics teams. Those interested in donating may contact Sylvester at shasyl@myfitz.net.

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