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Weaver Lake Elementary shows why local magnet schools are a hot draw.

In many ways, the building off Weaver Lake Road in Maple Grove resembles a typical public grade school. The gymnasium hosts physical education class, the media center is stocked with kid-friendly books, and the jungle gym outside harnesses a type of organized chaos known as recess. But a deeper look reveals an environment of anomaly. The science lab, math and engineering lab, and outdoor classrooms tucked into the woods are just a few give-aways: This is no ordinary elementary school.

Weaver Lake Elementary: A Science, Math and Technology School is a magnet school serving more than 700 students in grades kindergarten through six, from five school districts in the Minneapolis area's northwest suburbs. The magnet program, which originally was hosted by now-closed Edgewood Elementary in Brooklyn Park, moved to its Maple Grove location in 2008.

By Bobby Hart // Photos by Marshall Franklin Long



Johanna Uden puts worms collected from an outdoor experiment into a water bin, while Jenna Uden, Olivia Paulek and teacher Gina Keenan watch for more emerging worms.

Recognizing Excellence: Implemented in the late '60s, magnet schools attract students from across other school zones to improve racial balance and increase educational quality.

The idea was to give parents and students an appealing option outside of their regular boundaries by offering a specialized curriculum, such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) in Weaver Lake's case. But using Weaver Lake Elementary as an example of a typical magnet school would be selling the school and ISD-279 short.

The Osseo School District is home to four magnet schools: Weaver Lake Elementary, Birch Grove Elementary School for the Arts, Park Center Senior High International Baccalaureate (IB) Global Studies School and North View Junior High IB World School. The first three of these were among the 53 schools across the nation and seven in the state honored as a 2009 Magnet School of Excellence, the top category of awards given by Magnet Schools of America. North View Junior High IB World School shared 2009 Magnet School of Distinction honors with Park Center Senior High IB World School, recognizing their combined work as IB magnet schools.

An association of more than 2,000 magnet schools, the Magnet Schools of America chooses the Magnet Schools of Excellence based on innovative instructional strategies, student assessment, parent and community involvement, previous awards and achievements, demographic profile and program overview. For three of the four local district's schools to get this honor is no conventional feat, according to Weaver Lake principal Gretchen Peel.

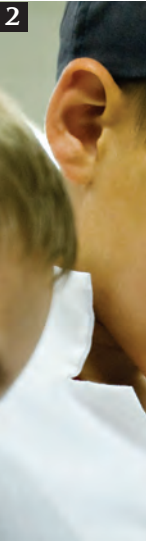
"It would be very rare for a district to have 100 percent of its school districts receive an award from the Magnet Schools of America," Peel says. "And three of four, 75 percent of our magnet schools, received Magnet School of Excellence. That's very unusual."

Building Weaver Lake's reputation a notch higher, this is its second consecutive year it's bringing home the association's top honor. "It's very exciting," Peel says. "It's a validation of the work that our staff has done, the work our students do, the support of our parents, our school district and our community."



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1. Teacher Andy Harne leads a group through Weaver Lake Elementary's outdoor classroom.
2. Fourth-grader Ian McNicholes studies a worm in the science lab.
3. Olivia Paulek fills in her worm diagram with help from teacher Gina Keenan.
4. Jenna Unden, Ian McNicholes and Johanna Unden use a ProScope to take a closer look at some worms.



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Weaver's Way: Weaver Lake Elementary takes an inquiry-based and highly technological learning approach to teaching hands-on math and science activities.

Since the school has been supported by numerous grants, including a federal magnet schools assistance grant through the North West Suburban Integration School District—a consortium of seven school districts that Weaver Lake is a part of

—and integration aide from the state, extra technological expenses can sometimes be afforded. For example, it's not rare to see students blogging or conducting a science experiment with the help of a ProScope, a high-resolution digital microscope. Teachers also indulge in the technological perks of using a SMART Board, an interactive white board.

"In most regular elementary schools, kids go to the computers once a week, and it's kind of a special thing they do," curriculum integration coordinator Lisa Koch says. "Here, the computers are in the classrooms and there are SMART Boards in every room. You'd walk into a third-grade classroom and see kids lying on the floor working on their laptop, maybe creating a podcast."

Although extra focus is spent on science, math, technology and a considerable amount of outdoor education, other areas of learning aren't sacrificed, according to Peel. "What we offer is an additional infusion of science, math and technology," she says. "We have what we call value-added projects. Those are based on national standards in science, math and technology, and those are in addition to meeting the core curriculum and basic standards."

Peel says Weaver Lake teachers constantly are challenged to review and revise the curriculum of value-added projects, some of which are community partnerships with area businesses and philanthropies. For example, kindergardeners recently did a math and science pet project with PetSmart and made donations to the Humane Society, while third-graders ran a healthy snack shop and donated \$1,000 in proceeds to Feed My Starving Children.

Weaver Lake's inquiry-based learning approach is also different than what's used in your average public school. It focuses on learning through asking questions.

"It's just that natural style of learning. As kids grow up, they're just such sponges," second-grade teacher Andy Harne says. "Our job is taking them from one place to another, but the means of getting there is up to them. We just kind of guide that. Everyone has their own unique style of learning, and the inquiry learning meets kids' needs." //

@ To read more about the history of the NWSISD and why it was formed, read the uncut story on maplegrovemag.com.

Maple Grove Community Center hosts a Power of Choice for Education fair for parents to learn about magnet school choices 10 a.m.–3 p.m. Nov. 7. Apply for Weaver Lake Elementary's priority period Nov. 7–Jan. 15, 2010, for the 2010–2011 school year. Those applications, which are collected by the North West Suburban Integration School District, will then be put in a random lottery to see who is accepted. Applications are accepted throughout the school year in case any current students move away.