

The Learning Curve

This page was written and designed by Education First in cooperation with the Bibb County Board of Education, the Peyton Anderson Foundation, and The Telegraph.



Your weekly guide to students, schools, teachers and triumphs in Bibb County's Public Schools

Difficult Dialogues

As part of the national First Amendment Schools project, Southwest has been named an Affiliate School and is the first in Georgia to take part in this program. According to Henry Ficklin, Director of the Law Academy, the program is designed "to make sure kids understand their freedoms and how to be good citizens in a diverse society."

"One of the things we want to do is to have a laboratory of democratic experiments," says Ficklin. Throughout the year, the school will be hosting a series of debates entitled "Difficult Dialogues," each highlighting a topic which is being discussed nationally and featuring prominent community members knowledgeable on that topic. Ficklin wants the students "to hear the discussion, take it back to the classroom, and talk about it some more."

The first in the series was "Does the Faith-Based Initiative Violate the



Attorney Lonzy Edwards (left) listens as Attorney Tripp Self argues his side of the debate.

Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution?" with Attorneys Lonzy Edwards and Tripp Self. By bringing in local attorneys who are active in the community on many levels, Ficklin hopes the students will show an interest in "this lively and deep debate."

Senior Anthony Calhoun "thought it was very inspirational and made it very easy for us to understand. They both made good comments on the topic." Before the debate, he says thought it does violate the First Amendment, but even though "the discussion reinforced that, I plan on learning as much [about it] as I can, when I can."

Senior Danny Glover did not know much about the issue before the debate from either side before the debate, but says "it opened my eyes to a different part of government. It gave me a real insight into the faith-based initiatives." With what he found out through the debate, he plans on finding out as much as he can before forming an opinion.

"[The lawyers] both had their views and debated their side very well," says Senior Amber Singleton. "Stuff you wouldn't think about, they brought up." She also walked into the debate thinking there should be a complete separation of church and state, but now she realizes there's even more to the topic than she originally thought. "They had so much to say, maybe I should look into it some more."

The next in the series of "Difficult Dialogues" will be "Jailing Journalists: Is It a First Amendment Rights Violation?" on October 27 at 7:00 p.m.

Westside High School students take top state and national math honors

Two seniors from Westside High School brought home state and national honors over the summer thanks to their proficiency in mathematics. Quantina Pittman was honored as the statewide Trig Star Contest winner, and Margo Gonterman was on the first place team at the American High School Mathematics Competition held at the University of Oklahoma.

"We're really proud of the fact that we have students excelling at mathematics," says Math Department Chair Helen Rutherford.

"I've always like math, and it was fairly easy," Pittman said of her trigonometry exam. She came in one day after school to take the exam, and the score for the one test was applied to the local and state levels of competition.

The competition is administered by the National Surveying Association, and to participate, a school must be sponsored by a local member of the association. Westside has been sponsored and participated since 2002 by Donaldson, Garrett, & Associates, Inc.

To her, she said, it was just another test her teachers were asking her to take. The first page was basic trigonometry like angles and sides of triangles; the second page were word puzzles she had to solve using trigonometry; and when asked about the third and final page, she just chuckles and says, "it was real hard."

Having a difficult time with the end of it, and finding out she could potentially win \$200, did not faze her, though. "I wasn't thinking about it; I just tried my best, and it ended up being good enough."

Over the summer, she was honored at the Association's annual statewide banquet, where she received her prize money and a plaque.

Just like Pittman, Gonterman did not think much about the competition she was entering. Every month, the American High School Mathematics Association would send the school two problems which students could work on and turn in. At the end of the



Margo Gonterman (left) and Quantina Pittman (right) both plan on pursuing math in college.

year, she was also asked to take a test after school.

"I did the most problems and got them right," she says. "I took the test after school and didn't think much of it; it was just another test."

Despite it being "just another test," she does say "it was pretty hard." Ten pages of problems, and she could not use a calculator. However, she never thought she would be invited to the national competition. Even after receiving the letter in the mail informing her of her success, she still did not believe it. "Are they serious?" she thought. "It took me a while to remember what they were talking about."

Gonterman was invited to the University of Oklahoma to spend several days of intense competition against some of the nation's top high school math minds. Out of 20 people – she was the only female – four teams needed to be built, so the first day was individual competition with their scores determining teams.

Team competitions consisted of three 20 minute problems: a word problem, a physics problem, and a race to see which team could identify the first 100 prime numbers without a calculator. "We won the prime number problems," she said proudly.

After that, they had to work as a team on one specific problem. The first person would solve part of the problem to fill in the blank for the next person to solve their part, and so on down the team. "If one person got it wrong, the whole team got it wrong." The final competition was a scavenger hunt where they had to solve math problems to get the hints.

How'd they do under such a mentally challenging ordeal? Well, they came in first place.

Both girls say math is a passion for them and plan on studying it in college. After her success in the Trig Star Competition, Pittman says she is seriously considering surveying as a career, and she's already been offered scholarships by several companies if that's what she chooses.

Online homework help site launches over the summer

"All they need is a computer and internet access; everything we do is free," says Dr. Pat Burgess, Executive Director of the recently launched homework and school subject online help site 'Pupils Ask Teacher Help, or PATH (www.pathwhelp.org).

Though it was just launched this past July, it is based on a similar program run by Dr. Burgess and sponsored by AOL for the past 12 years. Before AOL merged with Time Warner and did away with it, the online sessions called on 1,200 teachers for assistance and helped half a million students every week.

Knowing the demand for such a service was there, she was able to convince more than 200 of those teachers to volunteer for PATH. Since the service is completely online, Dr. Burgess can recruit teachers from around the country and around the world. They will soon be launching French and Spanish versions of the Web site.

To offer the most opportunities for assistance to the most students, there are three different ways to access the collective knowledge gathered there. Available 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year are the message boards and e-mail assistance. Students can go to one of the many topics

and forums dedicated to a variety of subjects and post their questions. Teachers can then post replies, suggestions, hints, and any helpful Web sites. Since it's posted publicly, any student viewing the message boards can browse these questions and answers, maybe finding the answer they were looking for. Also, a student can directly e-mail a teacher with their question.

From 5:00 p.m. until midnight eastern standard time, students can log into one of 25 live chat rooms where they can ask a teacher directly a question. The teacher will then help them work through what they don't understand, using similar problems as an example. "All along, the teacher is asking, do you understand this? Can you do this problem?"

Dr. Burgess wants to stress they help with the concepts of problems to get them to figure out the answer on their own. "We don't want to do their homework for them. Our volunteers are teachers and wouldn't want someone else doing their students' work."

Another fear she likes to calm is a student's safety online. Since it is online, there is almost no cost in its operation, but she has taken out a bank loan and is applying for grants to cover mainly one thing:

"the biggest expense is the background checks. We won't allow a teacher to talk to children or give them e-mail addresses until we've done a background check of at least 10 years."

PATH is also partnering with non-profit group Working to Halt Online Abuse (WHOA) whose "mission is to protect children." Not only do they train the teachers in online safety, there is a member of WHOA present in every chatroom whenever they're open. Should any bullying or solicitation occur, teachers are equipped with a special button which will knock that person out of the room and block them from ever logging in again.

According to Dr. Burgess, they now have teachers covering almost every subject, including some electives, for grades K – 12 and even some college courses. Soon she hopes to launch a Knowledge Bank, which will consist of articles written by teachers stemming from question and answer sessions on the message boards. It will be powered by a keyword search and is being run by a retired librarian. "It acts like an encyclopedia for the students."