Keith Valley Middle School Teachers Won the Pennsylvania Education Innovative Teacher Award

Three Keith Valley Middle School teachers received a much-deserved recognition this month. Dawn Gallagher, autistic support teacher, Erika Schwanbeck, health and physical education teacher, and Sarah Abercrombie, adapted physical education coordinator, won the Pennsylvania Education Innovative Teacher Award. They received their award at the PA Public Education Foundation’s (PaPEF) in Public Education Leadership and Awards Dinner at the Hershey Lodge & Convention Center on Oct. 16, 2019.

The Innovative Teacher Award recognizes teachers for outstanding classroom leadership and rewarded the team with $1,000.

Gallagher, Schwanbeck and Abercrombie received their award from their initiative Fitness Friends. The initial idea was to bring the autistic support students to Schwanbeck’s eighth grade dance class, where they could get comfortable around their general education peers. This was the first time for this specific group of non-verbal, self-contained autistic support students to venture away from the adapted physical education setting.

The push-in design was successful and extremely positive because of the welcoming, safe and inclusive environment established by the staff and general education students. Due to the initial success, the educators involved saw the potential and need for a class that was intentionally designed to help support autistic support students increase fitness levels while engaging with their peers.

Fitness Friends fit nicely into the eighth grade physical education elective program, which allowed for the general education students to choose to be in that class to engage with their peers from autistic support and our life skills support classes. Fitness Friends created an inclusive environment where lessons surrounding accepting differences, tolerance and collaboration, far exceeded any learning objectives, course content or assessment criteria.

“Educating the whole child has always been a major goal and vision at Keith Valley,” said Principal Jon Kircher. “While academic achievement is usually the focus in the educational setting, much bigger, and far more important, are the lifelong lessons that have been achieved during this experience. Students reported life-changing social and emotional growth after participating in this class. We are very proud of the efforts of Dawn, Erika and Sarah and their work to help all students feel accepted and that they truly belong!”

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Photo from left to right: Assistant Superintendent Monica Taylor, reward recipients: Sarah Abercrombie, Dawn Gallagher and Erika Schwanbeck, Board Member Jennifer Wilson, Principal Jon Kircher. Photo courtesy of Hatboro-Horsham School District.