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## Syracuse City School District NSBE Jr.

# CHAPTER OF THE Year!

By Siobhan Leftwich

When you ask Ken Baxter why the Syracuse City School District (SCSD) NSBE Jr. Chapter was named Chapter of the Year for 2013–14, he doesn't skip a beat.

"Because we have many challenges," says Baxter, the group's administrator. "We're a district-wide chapter and can only meet on Saturdays and during school breaks. Belonging to our chapter takes dedication and commitment. We have to work together. We have to be focused."

"We're a combination of all the city high schools and middle schools," says Brandi Fowler, chapter vice president. "We all go to different schools, so when we come and meet on Saturdays, we meet with people throughout the district who have a similar interest. I'm really close to the kids in NSBE. We're like a family."

On Saturdays, the chapter meets at

Nottingham High School in Syracuse, N.Y., for three to four hours. In addition, for the past five years, the chapter has held a weeklong residential summer camp at Syracuse University, where students learn science, math, literacy and engineering. The Syracuse City School District is a major supporter of the camp, which has two other backers: National Grid and the Louis Stokes Alliances for Minority Participation (LSAMP), which is an organization dedicated to diversifying the science, technology, engineering and math workforce in the U.S. Before the camp's founding, LSAMP was looking to connect with a pre-college program at the university, Baxter says.

"They provide the space at Syracuse University for SCSD NSBE Jr. to offer a summer STEM camp, and the school district provided the finances," he explains. "After the success of the camp, National Grid decided to accept our proposal and become a financial partner for the camp and advisor for the program."

The SCSD chapter has 110 members, who consistently attain grade-point averages of 3.2 to 3.4.

"The students in our chapter do significantly better on state assessment tests than (do) other students in our district," says Baxter, who is the vice principal of Nottingham High.

"NSBE is one of the most rewarding programs I've been involved with," says Fowler, 17, who joined the Society when she was in 8th grade. "NSBE allows me to interact with kids who want to do better. Everyone has a positive attitude about life, about achieving goals."

In the past year, the chapter has won first place in the FIRST LEGO League competition, third place in MATHCOUNTS and second place in the Try-Math-A-Lon competition for 9th and 10th graders. Members of the chapter have gone on to attend Harvard University, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Cornell University and Columbia University. One chapter

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member, recipient of a Gates Millennium Scholarship, is studying engineering at Syracuse University.

#### COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE

Ilean Curry, 17, was introduced to NSBE through her technology teacher at Corcoran High School in Syracuse. She’s been involved with NSBE since 8th grade and is now chapter secretary.

“Being in NSBE helps me in school, because you can bring your work in and get help,” says the aspiring actress, who plans to study acting and engineering in college. “If I have trouble with precalc homework, I can go to NSBE, and an advisor will help me.”

“All of our advisors work very hard at what they do,” Baxter says. “None of them, except for the math teachers, are particularly skilled. We have social studies teachers and science teachers who are creating robots, creating projects. They have to break down projects before they present them. None of our advisors are engineers.”

Fowler credits her chapter’s award to the chapter members’ dedication to NSBE’s mission, inside and outside of the classroom. In addition to participating in chapter meetings and NSBE competitions, chapter members mentor elementary school students, distribute holiday gifts at local hospitals, participate in “A Walk for Education” and spend part of their Saturdays tutoring fellow chapter members and being tutored by members of the chapter’s collegiate partner, NSBE’s Syracuse

University chapter.

“I love math,” says Fowler, who plans to major in engineering in college. “I love the challenge of trying to figure something out on my own. I love the fact that there’s more than one way to get to a solution.”

NSBE’s Try-Math-A-Lon competition is at the top of Fowler’s list.

“We compete against other teams, against people in other regions,” she says. “And last year, we came in second or third regionally. We’ve also placed fourth in nationals.”



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“I’m proud of my kids and my staff,” says Baxter. He credits a commitment to

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— *Brandi Fowler, Chapter Vice President*

Curry, who loves chemistry, says her favorite NSBE experience came when she was in the 9th grade, when her team placed first in the regional robotics competition.

“We are a very caring chapter, and we’re always trying to help each other,” she says. “NSBE has helped me become the person I am. It helped get me involved in math and science and taught

excellence — by the chapter’s students, teachers, parents and advisors — with bringing about the chapter’s ongoing success. “The kids are awesome. They take things to the next level. They teach us. It’s definitely a (two-way) relationship.” ■

*Siobhan Leftwich is a writer based in Baltimore, Md.*