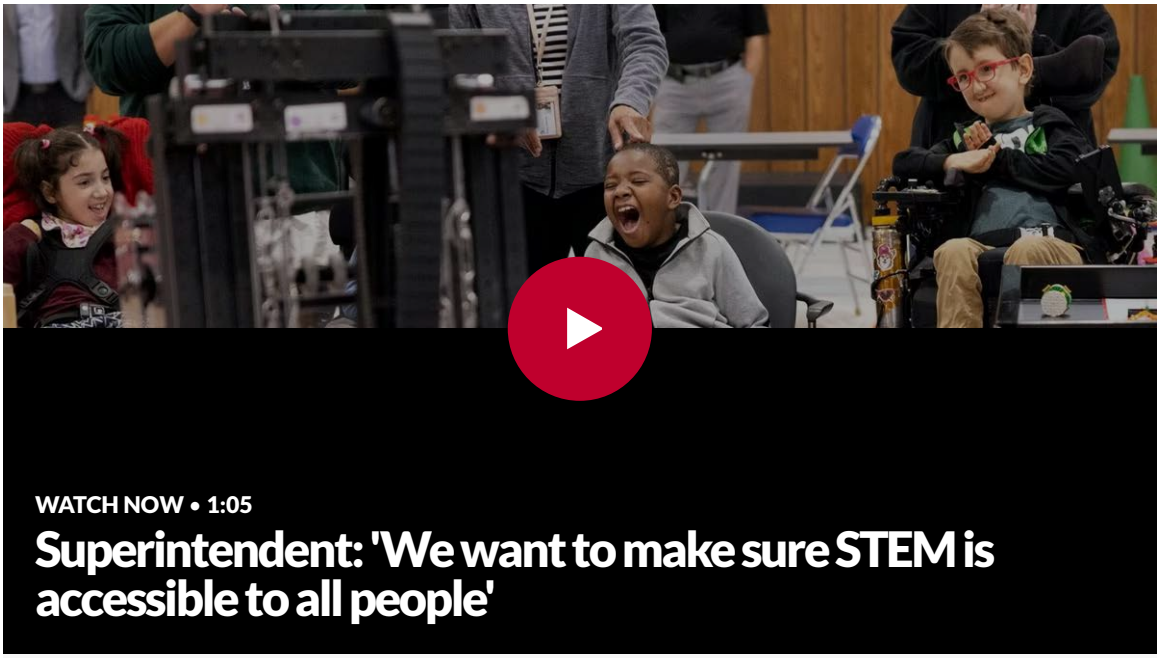
LONG ISLAND / EDUCATION

Henry Viscardi School looks to build off first robotics day



Two robotic companies joined high school students from Mineola High School for 'Robotics Day' at the Henry Viscardi School in Albertson. Credit: Debbie Egan-Chin

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Liam Cullen, 11, a sixth-grader at the Henry Viscardi School for severely physically disabled students in Albertson, thought Ghost, a robot built by students at Mineola High School, was "cool."

Liam was particularly struck Friday by how Ghost "moved around and stuff," and he was intrigued by how it carries blocks and places them onto a multilevel platform, shifting directions as it goes.

Ghost was built last year for the FIRST Robotics Competition held at Hofstra University. With the exception

of electrical components that all competitors received, "We had to basically build everything from scratch," Nicholas Yokaitis, 16, a Mineola High School senior, said on Friday.

Yokaitis joined other Mineola students, and seventh-graders from J. Taylor Finley Middle School in Huntington, at the Viscardi School to help introduce Liam and other students there to advanced robotics at Viscardi's first robotics day.

Students from The Henry Viscardi School watch a robot built by Mineola school district students at Viscardi's first robotics day Friday. Credit: Debbie Egan-Chin

"It would be hard for me to build," Liam said, alluding to the physical challenges he has with his hands. Nevertheless, he entertained the possibilities of one day being able "to build something like this."

That was the point of inviting FIRST, a New Hampshire-based nonprofit that has affiliates on Long Island, nationally and globally, said Viscardi School superintendent Angelo Zegarelli.

FIRST — For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology — is a nearly 35-year-old organization that advances education for young people in STEM fields.

"We're looking at anything we can do to our enhance our STEM program," Zegarelli said, using the acronym for science, technology, engineering and math. "And bringing in things like robotics and [computer] coding concepts are going to be critical for developing our students, not only as they transition from grade to grade, but as they transition, eventually, into college and the workforce."

Dina Bellezze, the school's educational technology specialist, said they approached FIRST.

"We wanted to be able to learn what we could do to make it modified so that our students can also have an experience with robotics," Bellezze said. " ... We wanted to have the opportunity to see what it was all about, and also ask a neighboring school that was already in robotics and have them demonstrate what they've been doing."

The school also consulted with Festo Corp. in Islandia, which describes itself as a global manufacturer of process control and factory automation, to help come up with adaptive modifications for the Viscardi students.

The Viscardi School brought its K-12 students into the gymnasium to build their own Lego bridges, and to see more complicated versions that visiting students had developed for robotics competitions and tech challenges.

Third-graders, from left, Sophia Vigder, Khalil Bayo and Bear Bonner watch a robot demonstration Friday.
Credit: Debbie Egan-Chin

Betsy Daniels, senior program manager with FIRST, said it started with the high school-level robotics competition about 35 years ago, then added the Lego League and Tech Challenge, 20 years ago and 15 years ago, respectively.

She said about 600,000 kids are involved globally in about 110 countries, aided by 200,000 volunteers, including those on Long Island.

Daniels said FIRST officials had provided two days of professional development training for Viscardi teachers. "Then today was a chance to introduce the kids to FIRST," she said.

The Viscardi students began with six Lego pieces each that they were instructed to make into a bridge. They were sometimes aided by Mineola and Finley students.

Viscardi seventh-graders Ed Tineo and Victoria Velasquez, both 12, led their group of students in building an impressive arch bridge that caught Daniels' attention. They later transformed it into what they said was a highway — showcasing a long straightaway — that connected with the arched bridge.

"We did this in like less than 2 minutes," Ed said.

For him, the robotics program showed him “that you can imagine anything, build anything that you want.”

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