



Jennifer Friend-Kerr works with students

Collaboration: Innovation in the Classroom

Foundation for Educational Excellence and Beaufort County School District

How much more exciting would your K-12 education have been if your daily schedule included classes in Robotics, Greenhouses, Pickleball, Infrared Photography, Roller Coasters, and Magnetic Math and Engineering?

One local nonprofit organization, in partnership with Beaufort County School District (BCSD), has helped make these innovative classes a reality for students. Foundation for Educational Excellence (FEE) was founded in 2007 by former educators living in Beaufort County, with encouragement from then BCSD Superintendent Valerie Truesdale. A formal agreement between FEE and BCSD was signed and FEE

started distributing grants in 2009.

"FEE raises funding to provide grants to teachers that will permit them to teach in different ways, innovatively and creatively beyond traditional curriculum and budgets," said FEE Board Chair Lisa Carroll.

The impact of FEE grants touches every K-12 school in the district, plus technical schools and special needs programs. FEE receives anywhere from 20 to 40 grant applications per cycle, and generally awards 18 to 25 grants.



"It's a fairly simple electronic application, and we accept applications for all subject areas and categories, in all grades," said FEE Board Secretary Carole Ingram.

There are four FEE grant types: Innovative Teacher Grants, School Resource Grants, Helping Build Teacher's Toolkit Grants (for first and second year teachers), and Student Enrichment Grants, which provide funding for students representing their school in competitions.

"Last year, FEE awarded 10 Helping Build Teacher's Toolkit Grants and surprised the teachers by presenting them in their classroom," said Carroll. "New teachers are under a lot of scrutiny, and the first two years can be difficult. Many of the grant recipients were emotional about being honored."

In November, FEE announced its grants recipients for Fall 2023 (12 Innovative Teacher and 7 School Resource grants), and the winners included such classes as "VEX123 Robotics and Coding in Early Elementary."

"The Foundation for Educational Excellence has awarded over \$350,000 in grants for Beaufort County Public School programs," said Carroll. "We estimate that we have impacted more than 33,000 student learning opportunities. And it will go far beyond that because a lot of these grants fund programs, tools, and equipment that can be repurposed each year and stay in the classroom."

Teachers who receive a grant are required to submit status reports and a detailed final report, with photos and/or video.

Teachers may apply for, and receive, multiple FEE grants, as long as it is a new class or project. One of the BCSD teachers who has taken full advantage of this is Jennifer Friend-Kerr, STEAM (STEM + Art) Teacher at Hilton Head Elementary School for the Creative Arts. Friend-Kerr has been a teacher at the school for 12 years and has received over 10 FEE grants.

"My first grant with FEE was in 2015 called Stylus Writing, which taught my students how to write in cursive," said

Friend-Kerr. "The Pickleball project ('In a Pickle' 2021) is my favorite."

Students learned the history and scoring of Pickleball, along with measurement conversions, calculating area/comparing percentages, and writing and digitally creating infographics about Pickleball. The culmination of the project was students designed Pickleball courts using Legos to understand the dimensions of a court on a different scale.

Friend-Kerr credits the FEE grants with helping her become the teacher she is today.

"I'm appreciative of FEE for encouraging teachers to be innovative without putting a financial burden on them. It makes me think outside the box and be even more creative. And I just enjoy offering the kids the opportunity to learn in a hands-on way. When students are engaged, they learn and behave better."

In addition to the partnership between FEE and BCSD, FEE also has a longstanding partnership with the Community Foundation of the Lowcountry. In fact, FEE has three separate funds at CFL, including an endowment fund.

"FEE has found CFL to be an amazing consultant and collaborator," said Ingram. "Every time I reach out to CFL about funding, understanding something budgetary, or need guidance, a staff member is always there to help."



(from left) FEE's Karen Beltz, Jennifer Friend-Kerr, and FEE's Connie Johnson