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Golden Apple scholars aid IMSA staffers at summer institute

22 college students spent 5 weeks working alongside faculty at the Illinois Math and Science Academy

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Special to the Chicago Tribune

July 29, 2008

You've heard it before: Americans are falling behind in science and math.

But it's hard to get ahead without people who know how to make the subjects understandable, fun and interesting.

"There's a great need for new math and science teachers," said Dominic Belmonte, president and CEO of the Golden Apple Foundation, a non-profit organization that recognizes outstanding teachers. "America's ability to compete is dependent on the number of professionals in the scientific and engineering field, and the quality of instructors."

This summer, 22 college students aspiring to be math and science teachers worked alongside the faculty at one of the state's premier schools, the Illinois Math and Science Academy. The Golden Apple scholars helped IMSA staff teach middle and high school students for five weeks during the Golden Apple Summer Institute.

"We're working with the best of the best," said Elisabeth Knierim, an incoming freshman majoring in chemistry education at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

Organizers say the program aims to encourage these future teachers to seek jobs in resource-poor schools, which tend to have trouble attracting high-quality educators. Many said their experience in the program inspired them to do just that.

"I plan to go to a turnaround school when I am done with college," said Kim Heilenbach, a scholar and a sophomore majoring in science and math middle

school education at Illinois State University.

In addition to helping teach, the scholars attended classes of their own to learn how to inspire students and especially how to reach out to students in poorer schools.

Jerone Dent, a graduate of the program who now teaches Downstate at O'Fallon Township High School, said the program is a great way to launch a teaching career.

"In any interview you mention that you're a Golden Apple scholar, you're pretty much guaranteed a job," Dent said. "It becomes the highlight of the interview."

Dent's younger brother, Ronald Madlock Jr., participated in this year's institute.

The inaugural IMSA program is only the latest iteration of the Golden Apple Foundation's Summer Institute. DePaul University and Elmhurst College also host institutes for aspiring teachers, although the IMSA-based program is the first to specialize only in math and science.

The program was funded by a \$341,000 U.S. Department of Education grant.

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