

TLC Wins National Contest District 63's After-School Program Wins Top Honors

BY JENNIFER JOHNSON - The Niles Herald

The accomplishments of East Maine School District 63's Total Learning Community (TLC) were illuminated during a "Lights on After School" showcase on Thursday, Oct. 9.

During the showcase it was announced that TLC has earned national recognition for offering positive after-school activities for students.

Pam Surber, TLC director, told a crowd of parents and students gathered at Gemini Jr. High School that TLC was one of only two after-school programs in the nation to win the National Community Education Day contest sponsored by the Kinderstreet Corporation.

TLC's entry was one of over 800 submitted. Programs were evaluated based on vision and creativity, use of partnerships, administrative efficiencies and impact of the program on individual students and the community. TLC was applauded by judges for "successfully building a healthy community by providing a wide array of expanded learning and enrichment opportunities for everyone in the community."

Surber said she is "elated" that TLC received such recognition.

"I was alone in my office when I got the word, and I didn't know how to contain myself," Surber recalled. "I was going down the hallways, looking for people to tell."

For winning the contest, the TLC program will receive a digital camera that will be used to photograph after school events to display on the TLC website.

The other winning entry was from a program in Santa Ana, California where after-school learning centers were established to offer academic help to children living in poverty and who come from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Surber said national recognition could help TLC secure funding, particularly from investors, in order for it to continue for years to come. TLC was started with a grant and funds are set to run out at the end of the current school year.

"Investors will understand that we are a national model for after school programs," Surber said.

The Lights on After School event exemplified what TLC offers students on a daily basis. Children created a science project, played ping-pong games, decorated cookies, climbed Gemini's climbing wall, participated in open gym activities and decorated light bulbs that were strung together and are now hanging in the TLC office. Children were also treated to stories told by the principal of Nelson, Twain and Apollo Schools, as well as U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th.

On hand to address the crowd about the value of after school programming were Schakowsky, State Sen. Susan Garrett, State Rep. Elaine Nekritz, Maine Township Supervisor Bob Dudycz and District 63 Superintendent Kathleen Williams.

"It was a really, really supportive environment," Surber said.

TLC's financial issues were also addressed, and the nearly 200 people gathered were urged to work together to help TLC continue.

TLC offers children activities and educational assistance before and after school, on weekends

and during summer months. Programming is held at Apollo, Mark Twain and Stevenson Elementary Schools, and at Gemini Jr. High School with an aim of being affordable for families, many of whom are low income.

The program has also developed a number of partnerships with companies, organizations and governmental bodies in the hope of keeping TLC funded and active beyond May, 2004 when \$2.4 million in federal funding runs out.