

# Richland One's Challenger Learning Center offers space explorations to infinity and beyond



Brian Weston

## Richland One Executive Assistant named SCAEOP Educational Office Professional of the Year

Richland One's Brian Weston has been named the 2022 Betty Blanton Educational Office Professional of the Year by the South Carolina Association of Educational Office Professionals (SCAEOP).

Weston, an executive assistant in the Office of the Executive Directors of Schools, advanced to compete for the state-level award after being named Office Professional of the Year by the organization's Richland County affiliate. He will be honored by SCAEOP at an awards luncheon on February 4.

"It always seems impossible until it's done," Weston said of his selection for the award, quoting Nelson Mandela.

Criteria used to judge candidates for the award include membership/leadership roles in educational professional associations, education and professional development, professional ratings and letters of recommendation.

Weston has worked in Richland One for 28 years and five years in his current position. He serves as president of the Richland County Association of Educational Office Professionals (RCAEOP) and as parliamentarian of the National Association of Educational Office Professionals (NAEOP). He earned NAEOP's highest professional standards certification, Certified Educational Office Employee (CEOE).

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Nearly 150,000 students served and Richland One's Challenger Learning Center is aimed directly toward its mission of creating space-like experiences for children in preparation for the day when they will take their own places among the stars.

The aerospace-themed educational program is one of only 40 worldwide. The Challenger Centers are located in three countries (the United States, Canada and South Korea) and 26 states. Despite COVID-19 restrictions, Richland One's Lead Flight Director at the Challenger Learning Center Dr. Carolyn Donelan said they are still open and available for students. Prior to the pandemic, the Center was open to the public, which accounts for approximately 30 percent of those served. Since 2020, the Center has been working exclusively within Richland One schools, except for summer camps.

"I want teachers to know that since schools cannot bring their students to us for field studies, we have activities that we can bring out to Richland One schools," said Donelan. "Originally, the Center targeted middle-schoolers. We have been expanding to include younger students and now have programs for pre-K through eighth grade."

Programs for elementary students in grades pre-K to fourth grade include AstroTots AstroAdventure, Simulated Space Mission, e-Planetarium, Ozobots, Robotics, Intro to Flight, Drone Demos, and various other hands-on science experiments and lessons. Offerings for middle-schoolers in grades sixth-eighth are the same as those for the elementary students except for the AstroTots, AstroAdventure

and Ozobots programs.

Attendees can go from launching missions and building their own rockets to a planetarium experience that lands them on the moon and beyond.

Additionally, the 2022 Summer Camp is already scheduled and anyone who registers and pays the fee may attend. Attendees' options include the Astronaut Academy, Aviation, Drones, Family Fun Rocketry, Robotics and Rocketry. The Rocketry program continues to expand, with the course "Becoming a Rocket Science Teacher," newly available to teachers. They can earn their Rocket Teacher Certification from the National Association of Rocketry and certify their students if they complete the course.

The program offerings are an extension of the Challenger Learning Center's goal of "touching the future," according to Donelan. Plans are to update the programs and activities continually, aligning with the new set of state science standards, she said.

"Children are the future of our society," said Donelan. "By inspiring students to STEM study (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects and consider STEM careers, we influence the future of our society."

Donelan, who has been employed with the district since 1998, previously worked in Richland One as an instructional technology education specialist for Instructional Technology Services; science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) consultant for Title I; the coordinator of the Professional Development Academy; assistant principal at Southeast Middle School; assistant principal at Caughman Road Elementary School; and science teacher at Olympia Learning Center



Commander Robyn Jackson with student.



Commander Terry Hufstetler leading middle school students on a mission.