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U-46 board recognizes Special Olympics, cheerleading gold medalists

By: Madhu Krishnamurthy

Elgin schools officials Monday night recognized five students for bringing home gold medals from the state Special Olympics and world cheerleading competitions.

Three of six U-46 BlueStars students placed first in the Illinois Special Olympics Summer Games held in June. The students qualified for the state competition by earning first place in the regional contest.

Natalie Gort, a fourth-grader at Nature Ridge Elementary School in Bartlett, and Laila Tran, a Streamwood High School senior, won gold in the 200-meter race; and Constantina "Tina" Hondros, a freshman at Bartlett High School, won in the 25-meter freestyle swim.

Larkin High School junior Jackson Miller won gold in the 50-meter backstroke swim at the Summer Games participating through the Northern Illinois Special Recreation Association.

"Tina has a constant smile, thoughtful disposition, and always, always demonstrates good sportsmanship," BlueStars Coach Lindsey Reynolds said. "Laila is a bright light and is constantly positive and lifting each person up, including her coaches. Miss Natalie is a great little competitor. She may be one of our younger athletes, but she has shown that her athleticism is right up there with the more experienced athletes."

Also, student Renee Grandstaff won gold as part of USA Cheer's U.S. National Special Olympics Unified Intermediate Team at the International Cheer Union World Championships in April in Orlando, Florida. Renee, a student in the district's transition programs serving students with special needs, is part of the Elite Stars team which trains in Hanover Park.

"We are incredibly proud of Renee for all of her hard work, determination, and confidence," teacher Danielle Williams said. "Renee is such an incredible student and an inspiration to many people around her."

Exchange program helps address bilingual teacher shortage in suburbs, state

By: Madhu Krishnamurthy

A state-sponsored teacher exchange program has brought 138 bilingual educators from Spain to work in Illinois classrooms this school year.

That includes 63 new and 75 returning bilingual educators in 19 school districts, including Crystal Lake Elementary District 47, Community Unit District 300, East Aurora District 131, Elgin Area School District U-46, Grayslake District 46, Schaumburg Township District 54 and Woodland District 50.

At U-46, the state's second-largest school district, eight teachers from Spain were hired this year as part of the exchange. The district on average hires six teachers yearly from Spain, spokeswoman Mary Fergus said.

Also, 10 additional bilingual teachers were hired from Puerto Rico this year to meet the demands of a growing dual language program, which now runs from kindergarten through 10th grade, she added.

This is the 22nd year Illinois has participated in the U.S. State Department's Exchange Visitor Teacher Program.

The Illinois State Board of Education is partnering with the Spanish Ministry of Education and Culture to promote cultural exchange and relieve a shortage in bilingual teachers. Statewide, unfilled bilingual educator jobs account for roughly 12% of the overall teacher shortage.

"Engaging with teachers of different cultures, ethnicities and linguistic capabilities benefits all students as they prepare to enter a global society," State Superintendent of Education Carmen Ayala said. "Bilingual educators play a critical role in preparing our increasingly diverse and multilingual students to thrive in college and career."

Teachers participating in the exchange program have at least two years of teaching experience. They commit to teaching one to five years and can choose from among 30 states and three countries.

Officials from local school districts and ISBE traveled to Spain in the spring to recruit candidates. The number of Spanish teachers who chose to teach in Illinois schools increased by 21 this year.