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'Dinner with a scientist' designed to help whet teens' appetites for science, math

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By Jeremy Borden,

Getting some teenagers to care has long been an age-old challenge for perplexed parents and teachers alike.

But getting them to care about science and math — that's another challenge altogether, and one considered among the most important in education if the United States is to compete with other world powers.

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Most teachers rarely have time to consider the global significance of it all. So the McLean-based Center for Excellence in Education wanted teachers of STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and math) to consider how to engage

students at a Sept. 18 event called "dinner with a scientist," held at George Mason University's Prince William campus.

Alessandra Luchini, an assistant science professor at George Mason, said she told teachers that their students must be able to see how science is applied in the real world. She found that many of the 25 or so Northern Virginia teachers who attended were already accomplishing that goal.

"I think they're doing an extraordinarily good job of providing up-to-date examples," she said. Luchini said she often brings in high school students to work in her lab and has had good results.

Chuchun Tsai, an engineering and technology teacher at Mount Vernon High School in Fairfax County, said his job is to ensure that students are ready for a job. But he also said that his students want to be creative, and he has to balance skills with other activities to keep them engaged.

"We have to make sure we maintain that creativity," Tsai said. "We don't know what new jobs are going to be required of us in 10, 20 years."

Christopher Moran, a teacher at Lake Braddock Secondary School in Burke, said he enjoyed hearing scientists and others talk about the real-world application of science, and that the dinner helped validate his approach — he said he looks to spark curiosity while making sure students are grounded in the fundamentals of science.

He said he has a lot of "A/F" students. Many are capable of doing well if he can get them

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interested. The stakes are large.

“The kids want to know more; some just don’t know how,” Moran said in an e-mail. “If we point them in the right direction, once you tap into their curiosity, they will do the rest.”



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