Carol Englander, SMILE Director

In 1994, Carol Englander introduced a hands-on, science and math program called SMILE (Science and Math Investigative Learning Experiences) to Curtis Corner Middle School, where she taught science for 35 years.

Thanks to Englander’s tireless efforts, a single after school club has expanded to six school districts, including seven elementary schools, five middle schools, and seven high schools. All together, SMILE serves about 400 students and 36 teachers. The program also conducts three professional development workshops each year for the 36 educators.

The genesis for what has become a very successful way of fostering students’ interest in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) happened while Englander took a sabbatical to Oregon State University in 1993-1994.

“I was told about this science-math program called SMILE,” recalled Englander. “I immediately wanted to get involved in the middle school activities.”

It didn’t take long for Englander to notice the impact the program had on the students.

“The career-oriented field trips showed students how what they were learning in school was applied to real-life scenarios and bringing students to the university for an engineering challenge weekend allowed students to see what college really looked like,” said Englander. “Through participation in SMILE, kids became motivated to do well in school, take four years of college track science and math courses in high school, which made higher education an attainable goal.”

The first participants in Rhode Island’s SMILE program followed a similar educational path.

“Our first high school graduates were four girls from South Kingstown,” stated Englander. “In 2002, all four graduated college, two from URI, one from Smith College in Massachusetts and one from the University of Maryland Eastern Shores.”

According to Englander, academic success is common for SMILE students.

• If a student is in SMILE for one year or more, their high school graduation rate is 97-100%.
• College students who are SMILE alumni major in STEM areas at a 75% rate, compared to the general college population in the United States which only has a 15% STEM major rate.

If Englander can secure additional funding, she would like to expand SMILE to more school districts.

“The SMILE model is easily replicated and there is no lack of interested students,” said the former teacher.