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2 Edward Little teachers heading to polar regions

The social studies teachers are among 11 educators nationwide to win spots in the research program.

BY **KAREN KREWORUKA**



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AUBURN — Two Edward Little High School teachers are among 11 in the nation chosen to study polar ecosystems this coming summer.

Jenn Heidrich and Erin Towns, both social studies teachers, applied separately to PolarTREC, an education research program that pairs educators with internationally renowned climate scientists to improve science education.

“We were stunned, absolutely stunned,” Towns said Monday.

She said the two Mainers were chosen from among 155 applicants across the country.

“We were chosen based on our own experiences, in a competitive, national application process, to pair with people with similar interests,” she said.



Jenn Heidrich, social studies teacher at Edward Little High School in Auburn.

“Pretty shocked” was Heidrich’s reaction to being chosen for the

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Though she teaches social studies at EL, Heidrich’s background is in science, she said. She has experience in labs and field work.

The goal of PolarTREC is to help create lessons that will combine social studies and environmental science, according to a news release from the [Arctic Research Consortium of the United States](#), which manages the program.

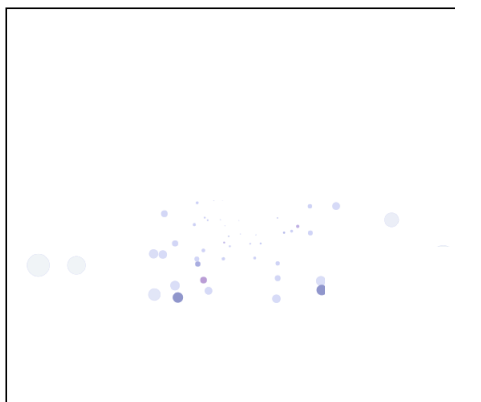
Heidrich hopes to bridge the gap at EL by working with science teachers on cross-content when she returns.

She plans to focus on how changes in remote ecosystems will affect cultures around the world.

“One of the biggest issues, when we talk about climate change, is that there’s snow on the ground, it’s still cold here,” she said. “Kids are having a tough time wrapping their heads around it.”

She is gathering questions from her students to take to the experts on her team.

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“They need to be interested to care at all,” she said.

Heidrich will spend five weeks beginning in June in the boreal forest of



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She will work with a biologist who is examining trophic cascades in the subarctic.

Trophic cascades are interactions that control entire ecosystems, such as removing top predators from food webs, as humans have done in many places through hunting and fishing, according to Wikipedia.



Edward Little High School social studies teacher Erin Towns in her classroom. *Russ Dillingham/Sun Journal file photo*

Towns will go to Ilulissat, a coastal town in western Greenland, for two weeks in August to study how increases in surface runoff affect ice flow and loss of water from the ice sheet to the oceans.

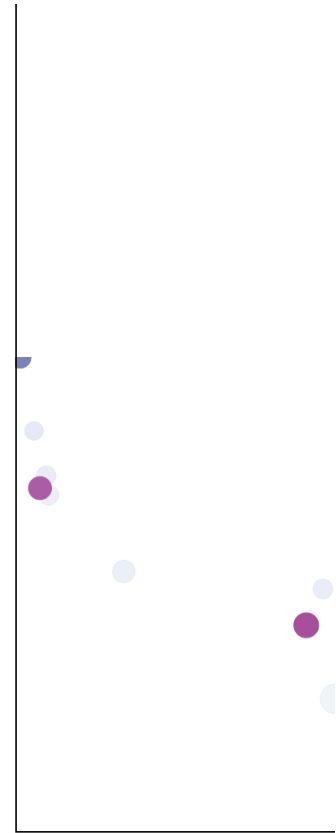
Towns said she is interested in the social, political and economic effects of climate change, especially how it is affecting the Gulf of Maine, which is warming 99 percent faster than other waters.

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“I made a direct reference (in my application) to Greenland’s melting ice sheet,” she said. That reference likely caught the eye of a glaciologist, with whom Towns will work.

“I need more (science) education,” she said. “That led me to looking at PolarTREC as a professional development opportunity to do hands on





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tasked with sharing their new knowledge with students. They also will share with other teachers in workshops and give presentations at the local, state and possibly national levels. And they will write online accounts during their studies. Follow Erin Towns on Instagram @Esctowns and Jenn Heidrich @MrsJHikes.

“We will share the experience of doing science,” Towns said. “We’ll share the importance of the polar region on Earth. It is remote and far away but an integral part of the Earth’s systems. It will come back to be in your face.”

Towns and Heidrich will participate as full research team members in authentic scientific expeditions, according to a news release. The teams will work in locations from the Arctic Ocean to Antarctica, as part of a program that allows educators to experience firsthand what it is like to conduct scientific research in some of the most remote locations on Earth.

This year’s expeditions will range from the Arctic Circle to the South Pole to study topics from marine biology to landscape ecology.

PolarTREC is funded by the National Science Foundation and additional partnerships.

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