



PHOTO BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

From left: Fatoumata Gai, an 11th-grade TSTT student; Colleen Keaveney, special education teacher and program coordinator; and Azon Laurel, a senior in the program at Fallsburg Central School District.

Fallsburg program helps students build skills, explore teaching careers

By **Patricio Robayo**

Staff Reporter

At the Fallsburg Junior-Senior High School, a group of students is getting firsthand experience in the classroom through Today's Students, Tomorrow's Teachers (TSTT), a program that gives students a closer look at the teaching profession while building their leadership and communication skills.

The program was started by Dr. Betty Perkins more than 30 years ago to increase the number of students of color entering education. Today, TSTT is active in schools across New York and beyond.

In Fallsburg, it's led by special education teacher Colleen Keaveney, who helps coordinate the program and mentor students throughout their high school careers.

"We start introducing it in eighth grade, but students really begin in ninth grade," said Keaveney. "They apply with a short written statement, and even if they aren't sure about becoming teachers, we encourage them to try it. It helps build leadership, planning, and public speaking skills that are useful in any field."

Students in the program shadow teachers, help with tutoring, and work in classrooms at both the high school and the elementary school. Keaveney said the experience helps them learn how to manage real responsibilities and work with different age groups.

Fatoumata Gai, an 11th-grade student in the program, said it has helped her grow in ways she didn't expect.

"I wanted to get more of the inside view of teaching. So far I've been learning a lot," said Gai. "It's helping me be more confident with speaking

and having a plan when I walk into a room. I used to just go with the flow. Now I actually plan things ahead."

She added that the program helped her "be able to speak out more and be more confident with myself. That definitely changed a lot for me and I feel more confident doing it."

Azon Laurel, a senior, said he appreciates the chance to give back while gaining practical skills.

"I love it. Being able to connect with the younger generation. And seeing the difference between when I was their age and like now at school," said Laurel.

Each year, students are recruited through a club fair and interest meetings. School counselors also help identify students who might benefit from the program.

TSTT also comes with the possibility of a scholarship. Students who complete the program and attend a partner college like SUNY

New Paltz, Mount Saint Mary, or Syracuse University may be eligible for up to 50 percent off tuition if they pursue a degree in education.

Keaveney said even students who don't plan to become teachers leave the program with stronger skills and better focus.

"When I was in high school, I didn't like school," she said. "Becoming a teacher wasn't even on my radar. But I had a teacher in 11th grade who encouraged me. That's why I tell students to just give it a try. You never know."

For the district, the program is also part of a longer-term effort to build a stronger local workforce.

"These students already know the community and the people in it," Keaveney said. "If they return to teach here, they're not starting from zero. They already understand the needs of our students and families."