

The 20th Annual National Science Bowl Competition Winds into Action

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November 10, 2009

Students from Across the Country Prepare for Regional Science Competitions.

For the past 20 years students have descended on Washington, D.C., every May to compete in the National Science Bowl® sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Science. This academic competition began in 1991 to encourage middle and high school-aged students to take a more active role in science.

Students are quizzed during a fast-paced question-and-answer format similar to that of the TV game show "Jeopardy." The students then earn extra points by tackling more in-depth short-answer questions that are solved by the entire team.

The national competition in May marks the end of a long academic journey that begins in November when students form teams and begin preparing for the regional competitions held throughout the country from January to March.

"This year we anticipate 6,000 middle school and 15,000 high school students will compete in regional competitions" said Sue Ellen Walbridge, DOE Office of Science program manager for the National Science Bowl®. "From this number, we anticipate 40 middle school and 69 high school teams will participate in the finals held in May."

It is never too early to begin practicing for the regional competition. This past Thursday, students from the Kenmoor Middle School in Landover, Md., and Takoma Park Middle School in Takoma Park, Md., had the special honor of practicing questions with First Lady Michelle Obama and Secretary of Energy Steven Chu at a specially staged "mock" National Science Bowl® at DOE headquarters in downtown Washington.

"Young people who participate in this competition put in late nights and long hours" said the First Lady. "But these students learn more than physics, chemistry, and math. They also learn discipline, teamwork, problem-solving, and communication skills." "And it elevates the social status of nerds everywhere," added Chu to a roar of laughter from the audience.

During the mock competition, the First Lady and Secretary of Energy quizzed the students on astronomy, biology, chemistry, Earth science, general science, mathematics, and physics. The audience, composed of Department of Energy employees, responded to the students on stage with nervous giggles, murmurs, and awed gasps as the students rapidly responded with answers on subjects as varied as buckyballs, hemoglobin, greenhouse gases, and nuclear power.

Many schools require the students practice to get on the team. "At Takoma Park Middle School, the students take a test to join the team," said team coach Jessica Phelan.



The Takoma Park Middle School team readies for the mock competition (Left to right: Catherine Xue, Sarah Wagner, Daniel Amir, team captain Avikar Periwal, Alan Du).

Photo Credit: Ken Shipp/DOE Photo

"We practice one day per week and increase our practice to twice a week as the regional competition date approaches," added Rebecca Epling, team coach for Takoma Park Middle School.

The students take their competition seriously. "We do not learn Earth science until eighth grade, so I got a geology book [to prepare]," said Daniel Amir, a member of the Takoma Park Middle School team.

"You see examples in Science Bowl from what you learn in the classroom," added Avikar Periwal, team captain for Takoma Park Middle School. "School gives you the general background, but Science Bowl is where I learn more about a particular field, like life science" said Vishnu Rachakonda, team captain for Kenmoor Middle School. "I learned something [about the mitochondria] at the mock competition today."

"This mock competition [gives us a chance] to learn about our competition" said Rachakonda. "Now we know how good the competition is and how to build and improve."

Regional National Science Bowl® champion teams receive an all-expense paid trip Washington, D.C., to compete in the national competition beginning April 29 and continuing through May 4, 2010. "In addition to the national competition, students also participate in scientific activities, seminars, and sightseeing," said Bill Valdez, Director of the DOE Office of Science's Office of Workforce Development for Teachers and Scientists, which administers the National Science Bowl® on behalf of the Department of Energy.



A tense moment for the Kenmoor Middle School team while answering a short-answer question (Left to right: Ahmad Kamil, team captain Vishnuthēja Rachakonda, Alex Yu, Selena Healey, and Kamyar Dastani).

Photo Credit: Ken Shipp/DOE Photo

Andrew Chen, a member of the winning 2009 Mira Loma High School team, advises future teams to "broaden your learning horizons. Do not limit yourself to what you learn in school, or to textbooks, but read science magazines, look online, and discuss your readings with your scientific peers."

The impact of preparing and participating in the National Science Bowl® is long-lasting for participants. JiSan Lopez, a member of the 1998 science bowl team from Albuquerque Academy, recalls, "Even though my team did not leave the National Science Bowl with a trophy or a great win-loss record, we left with many wonderful memories, some new friends, and the rock star feeling that comes with participating in a competition alongside the Nation's best and brightest science students."

After the event Kamyar Dastani, a member of the Kenmoor Middle School team, admits, "We were all a little scared before we got on stage." "I was shivering" chimed in Rachakonda. "But once we got on stage we became calm," said Dastani. "We had to try our best," concluded Alex Yu, Dastani's team mate.

To learn more about the DOE National Science Bowl® and team registration deadlines, and to locate the nearest regional competition, please visit www.sciencedoe.gov/nsb/default.htm.

The Office of Workforce Development for Teachers and Scientists within the U.S. Department of Energy Office of Science conducts the National Science Bowl® as part of a continuum of opportunities for the Nation's students and teachers of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.