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Science students let creative juices flow

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NEWARK -- The pingpong ball sailed through the air and -- Hoorah! -- bounced neatly on a landing strip made of cat litter.



TYSON TRISH / THE RECORD

Kevin Zellers loads a glider on a balloon as Rishabh Aggarwal, right, both students from Eisenhower Middle School in Wyckoff, holds it steady in preparation for the Balloon Launch Glider competition during the NJIT Science Olympiad.

Then came smiles all around. Wyckoff middle schoolers Charles Verhoog and Jon Tani had hit their target with a slingshot fashioned of two-by-fours, bungee cords and a large plastic spoon -- the culmination of months of extra science study.

"It feels great," said 13-year-old Charles, a seventh-grader at Eisenhower Middle School. "It's nerve-racking, but it's fun competition."

It was the

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"trajectory" contest at the annual New Jersey Regional Science Olympiad, a daylong problem-solving contest for 600 gifted science students that tested their mettle in physics, geology and engineering. Some 39 middle and high schools competed this month, hoping for a spot in the state finals.

The Olympiad was hosted by the New Jersey Institute of Technology and organized by the Research and Development Council of New Jersey.

"It's fun because a lot of science involves experimentation," said council executive director Tony Makoujy. "And it's a way for them to start thinking about what they want to do when they grow up."

Haworth and the Bergen Academies were also among districts that sent teams of about 15 students, who competed in such events as "Robot Ramble" and "Elevated Bridge."

Such events "encourage imagination and creativity," said Wyckoff teacher Jen Salmon. "They have free rein of the design. They build it, test it, redesign it. It is a full science experience."

For "Balloon Launch Glider," Eisenhower students Kevin Zellers, 12, and Rishabh Aggarwal, 14, balanced a homemade balsa glider atop a helium balloon, then let it float to the gymnasium ceiling. They tugged the balloon away from their plane, which was supposed to glide in slow, graceful circles.

Instead, the glider plummeted straight to the floor. Twice.

The boys, who had spent countless afternoons designing and building the glider, shrugged after their defeat. They said they had high hopes for an upcoming contest involving egg transportation via simple machines.

In the end, the Wyckoff middle school was among those headed to the championship, scoring in sixth place overall.

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