

Kids compete in Science Olympiad

By Erin Eileen O'Neill/For The Star-Ledger

January 12, 2010, 7:14PM

CRANFORD -- The packed lecture hall hushed yesterday as Michael Delaney, a Clark middle school student, poured another scoop of sand into a bucket hanging from the wooden bridge he spent months perfecting with a classmate.

The crowd gasped when the structure collapsed under the added weight. But then, applause rang out.



David Gard/New Jersey Local News Service

Middle and high school students competing in the Science Olympiad at Union County College today. Students from Montgomery Middle School watch as a plane flies past.

The bridge, a mere 17.3 grams, had held up 8,000 grams of sand.

It was one of 41 bridges built by middle and high school students from Middlesex, Union and Somerset counties, among others, fighting for a top spot in a regional tournament of the New Jersey Science Olympiad yesterday.

The tournament is not your average science fair. It's more like a track meet for science enthusiasts.

Delaney and Petela, both students at Carl H. Kumpf Middle School in Clark, were excited about the prospect of their bridge being among the best. The team placed third in the event among middle school teams, according to unofficial scores.

"We worked on it a lot," said Delaney's teammate, Johnny Petela, 12. "We made sure it was as light as

possible.”

Nearly 800 students met Tuesday at the Union County College campus in Cranford to test their skills during the regional tournament.

“While other kids are practicing football, soccer and field hockey, these kids’ extracurricular [activity] is science,” said Tony Makoujy, the event manager for the regional tournament.

The competition spans the gamut of the field, from fossils and forensics to meteorology and astrology.

The student teams split into pairs for each event.

Leah Suttner, 17, a senior at South Brunswick High School, said her team, which came in second place overall among the high school teams, looked at each member’s individual strengths before divvying up the events. For those events not quite suited to some team members, “we drew straws,” said Suttner.

Though the top 50 percent of the competitors at the regional tournament move on to a statewide contest, Middle Community School from West Windsor-Plainsboro took top honors among the middle school teams and West Windsor-Plainsboro North High School took first among the high school teams. The winning middle and high school teams at the state level advance to a national competition, which will be held at the University of Illinois this year.

The student teams practice several days a week after school to prepare. Many also dedicate their weekend afternoons to studying and practicing.

Vikram Pasumarti, a seventh-grade student at Montgomery Upper Middle School, which took third place overall among middle school teams, spent his evenings studying the elements to compete in the event called “Can’t Judge a Powder,” which challenges students to make observations instead of inferences while testing a powder.

“Scientists need a lot of dedication,” said Pasumarti.

© 2010 NJ.com. All rights reserved.