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Inquiring minds

Young scientists show projects on everything from E. coli to eye color

Sunday, May 13, 2007 3:52 AM

BY CHARLIE BOSS
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

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The science project started with a conversation.

Samantha Beetler's mother said those with blue eyes are more likely to develop astigmatism than those with darker eyes. The eighth-grader from Alliance Middle School in Stark County put her mom's words to the test by conducting surveys and eye exams for her science project.

Yesterday, the 14-year-old earned a superior rating for her research and presentation on how eye color affects vision at the annual State Science Day.

The event showcased the work of more than 1,000 students in seventh through 10th grades who earned top marks from local and district science fairs. About 5,000 people attended the event at Ohio State University.

The theories, studies and conclusions from months of work were on display boards with colorful titles, pictures and data. Students studied a range of topics: the impact of exercise on learning, effectiveness of anti-bacterial soap, how the brain sees motion, the calories in cat food.

Many were inspired by what they've seen in the news: bird flu, alternative fuels such as biodiesel and ethanol, and diabetes. One student compared the effectiveness of levees, dams and wetlands as flood-control systems.

Thanks to the Internet and partnerships with local hospitals and clinics, more students have easier access to information and research materials, said Lynn Elfner, chief executive officer at the Ohio Academy of Science, a State Science Day sponsor.

As a result, projects feature more statistical data rather than explanations, he said.

Eighth-grader Adriana Zinn had help from the Cleveland Clinic, where she attended a medical camp last summer. There, she studied the effects of sugar and antibiotics on the E. coli bacterium and a jellyfish gene. She expanded her research to test two different types of sugar for her school project. While she was able to get most of the test materials online, Zinn said the clinic helped supply a type of sugar she needed for her research.



NEAL C. LAURONDISPATCH

Thomas Colvin, a student in the Ohio State University physics department, blows cold nitrogen out his nose. He was taking part in a demonstration of liquid nitrogen put on by members of the physics honor society, Sigma Pi Sigma, during the 59th annual State Science Day in St. John Arena.



NEAL C. LAURONDISPATCH

Proud father Nate Beetler of Alliance looks over a "superior" rating his daughter Samantha received for her project on eye color and vision at the annual State Science Day at Ohio State University.

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"Science research is the track I've always wanted to get into," said Zinn, 13, who attends Hathaway Brown School in Shaker Heights in Cuyahoga County. Zinn received a superior rating for her project.

Jeffrey McPherson, a junior at Minerva High School in Stark County, wanted to see what kind of bacteria were found on the bottom of a handbag.

While he was able to identify some common kinds of bacteria such as E. coli and staphylococcus, he wished he had the technology available to determine other types of bacteria.

Still, the study made an impact.

"This is definitely the most interesting thing I've done," McPherson, 16, said. "It shocked me."

Beetler, the eighth-grader from Alliance, said her project, too, has left an indelible mark.

She polled 102 students, ages 11 to 16, asking them their eye color, sex and whether they wore corrective lenses. She discovered that more students with brown eyes didn't wear glasses than any other eye color.

She administered eye exams on 10 people each with blue, green, brown and hazel eyes. People with brown eyes had more accurate vision scores than those in the other groups.

"After I started getting into it, you want to find out more and more," she said. "Even though it's over, it makes you want to go back and learn more."

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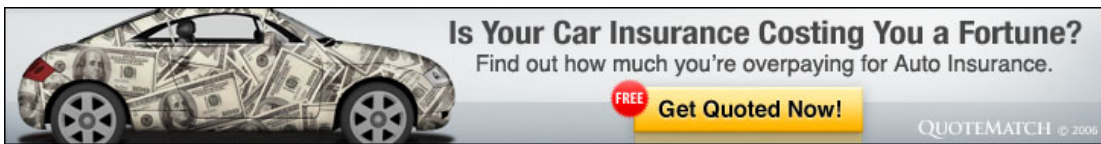
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