Grant Spotlight – Science

New Trier Students Help Volta Science Olympiad Teams Prepare for Regional and State Tournaments

“Our main objective is to engage New Trier students in meaningful interactions with the Volta students while helping them develop valuable skills in engineering, science and lab. This is a great embodiment of all three facets of our school motto—to commit minds to inquiry, hearts to compassion, and lives to the service of humanity.”

– Don Wurth, Science Faculty

Seven New Trier High School volunteers—comprising seniors and faculty—traveled with the Volta Elementary School Science Olympiad varsity team to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign for this year’s state tournament on April 21. After several weeks helping the Volta students prepare for the competition’s 23 science and engineering events, the New Trier students celebrated the Volta team taking home three medals in Thermodynamics, Rotor Egg Drop and Hovercraft. The varsity team also finished in the top 10 in other events. This was their fourth straight year competing at the state level.

On March 10, the regional tournament took place at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Volta’s varsity team brought home 12 medals and finished third in the city. The junior varsity team took home 16 medals and finished in a tie for first place. The entire team also won the 2018 Spirit Award.

Funding from the Foundation in the amount of $2,000 helped to cover some of the costs for science equipment, building materials, supplies and bus transportation for Volta students to visit New Trier. “Thanks to Marianne Breen and the New Trier Educational Foundation for the generous grant that allowed us to provide the kids with the equipment and materials they needed for their events,” acknowledges Don Wurth, Science Olympiad Sponsor. “Be assured that your support translated into many smiles, hugs, fist pumps, and parent tears at the awards ceremony.”

New Trier is now in its seventh year of sponsoring a Science Olympiad team within the Chicago Public School system. This is the fifth year working with Volta in the city’s Albany Park neighborhood. In total, over 125 CPS students have benefitted from this social service partnership, and over 150 New Trier volunteers have assisted in the effort. After receiving more than 50 applications, Volta selected 30 of their students (grades 6-8) for this year’s varsity and junior varsity teams.

VOLTA STUDENTS AND NEW TRIER STUDENT VOLUNTEERS SHARE THOUGHTS ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE

“Engineering and science is growing as a field, but there’s not enough females in it. I’m hoping that by doing this I can inspire other girls to continue in this field.”

– Mary ’18, NT

“Science Olympiad has been really fun and really good. The New Trier students have helped us a lot in reaching our goal.”

– Shreya
7th grade, Volta

“For kids who don’t have a science program like New Trier, Science Olympiad gives them a new perspective about the world. It’s important to share what we have.”

– Riley ’18, NT

“I’m blessed to have this type of support and encouragement from New Trier. Mr. Wurth and our coaches motivate us to do our best for ourselves and for our school.”

– Arjun
8th grade, Volta

“I didn’t get to do Science Olympiad in middle school. I think it’s good that we’re helping kids from another school to give them that experience.”

– Julie ’18, NT

“My whole experience has been about teamwork. Partnership with New Trier helped our team a lot to get a jump-start toward what we need to learn in the future.”

– Fabian
9th grade, Volta

“It was fun doing Science Olympiad in middle school. I like helping younger kids and helping them build a tower was a great experience.”

– James ’18, NT

“Science Olympiad gives us the opportunity to go to a good high school.”

– Kyle
9th grade, Volta
Throughout the fall, winter and spring, twenty New Trier volunteers—comprising juniors, seniors and faculty—spent their Saturday mornings assisting the Volta teams with studying, practicing labs, and building their engineering products. At the regional and state competitions, New Trier students assisted the younger students by carrying equipment to the events and (mostly) calming nerves.

“Science Olympiad gives kids the opportunity to do something productive and grow in this subject. It gave me the opportunity to help them do well in the competition.”
—Jack ’18, NT

Engineering events included building a lightweight balsa tower to hold as heavy a load as possible; an airplane powered by a rubber band to keep it in the air for as long as possible; a hovercraft to be directed down a track; an electric vehicle with a braking system that must be able to make designated stops; and a marble roller coaster that must keep a marble going for different target times. Mystery Architecture challenged the students’ ability to build on the spot using unconventional building materials such as paper cups, paper plates and plastic straws—even a bridge made with spaghetti!

The academic portion of Science Olympiad included events that challenged the students in chemistry, biology, astronomy and earth science. Optics tested their abilities to work with lasers and mirrors. Crime Busters challenged their skills in forensic science by identifying chemicals and understanding finger prints.

The Volta team faces major hurdles each new season. According to statistics provided by CPS,

Science Faculty Don Wurth displaying some of the winning entries at regionals.

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approximately 94% of Volta students come from low income households, and 63% of the students have limited English skills. Most of the other 14 CPS schools that participate in Science Olympiad are magnet or gifted schools that have selective enrollment.

The hard work of the Volta students and New Trier volunteers have resulted in Volta teams finishing in the top three in the city for the last three years and advancing to the state tournament. “For some Volta kids this might be their third year as a team member,” Wurth points out. “It’s great to see their progress from 6th to 8th grade, how much they’ve learned and needing less input from the volunteers.”

“Since this program began, many New Trier alumni who volunteered as students come back and say how helping the kids prepare for their tournaments was one of the highlights of their senior year or their high school experience,” Wurth adds.

“Kids at Volta see the opportunities maybe they didn’t realize they had. They go to ITI and U of I, their eyes light up and think, ‘Hey, maybe this could be my future.’ It’s also a wonderful program for the New Trier students to be in touch with kids who are less fortunate and realize they are just like the kids they grew up with. Even if they come from different backgrounds, they share the same fundamental things. And it’s a great opportunity from both sides to learn and grow.”—Phil Steptoe, New Trier Science Faculty

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“At this year’s regionals, seven former Volta students—currently at Von Steuben and Lane Tech—reconnected with us at the tournament and said they’re still doing Science Olympiad in high school. Some are taking AP Science classes,” Wurth recalls. “Faculty volunteers—Mary Beth Barrett, Tracy Smith, Phil Steptoe—and I like to think that we had a little part in encouraging them to stay involved in science and technology.”

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