



COMMENTS FROM MASSACHUSETTS SCIENCE FAIR JUDGES

“Think Of This As A Miss America Pageant For Science Geeks”

April Blodgett
AstraZeneca R&D Boston

Sharing her experiences judging State Science Fairs

For several years I have volunteered as a judge at the State Science Fair and recruited colleagues to judge with me. We have never regretted our loooooong day spent as judges at the fair. We walk away exhausted, having listened to almost a dozen students explain their projects and answered a trillion questions by curious high schoolers who are convinced that they've discovered something novel. I recall one woman who worked on recombinant Lewis antigens for her sophomore through senior year projects and eventually submitted a paper for publication before heading off to medical school at Brown. My all time favorite project was by a woman from Cambridge Rindge and Latin who designed and built an hydroponic system that removed heavy metals from a homemade sewage stream. Her working model was enthusiastically judged by an MWRA (Massachusetts Water Resources Authority) scientist who invited her to present the design to his superiors.

Projects presented at MIT are the best in the state. The students are competing against and learning from their peers, figuring out how to do great research, and most importantly, competing for college scholarships, corporate internships, educational travel, computer software, and scientific supplies and equipment. Think of this as a Miss America Pageant for science geeks.

“Give back to society without large time commitments or long-term promises.”

Ken Johnson
AstraZeneca R&D Boston

On why judging science fairs is a most fulfilling way to spend a few hours

Judge: “How did you get the idea for this project?”

Student: “My father is a butcher and I started to wonder about the best ways to preserve meat.”

Judge: “And what do you think is the impact of this research?”

Student: “I think I’ve demonstrated clearly that there are better ways to store our food. This will save millions of dollars in food spoilage and protect us from bacterial infections. This could have global implications.”

Judge: “Some of your ideas are excellent but if you continue this research you’ll need better negative controls, otherwise it’s difficult to substantiate the statement you make regarding your hypothesis.”

So it goes across the bustling floor of the field house. Young adults with an interest in science and an inextinguishable passion for learning meet head to head with scientists from all over the community who want to praise worthy research, make valuable suggestions to deserving and enthusiastic students, and offer constructive criticism to weak experimental design in an attempt to steer someone in a more worthwhile scientific direction.

This is not just judging - it’s mentoring. Students deal with teachers all the time. They know their teachers are there to help them. It is important for them to feel the scientific community is behind them as well. It is critical for their exemplary work to be recognized. This fuels the fire in them to continue their research and possibly enter a career in science. For some students, it is their first interaction with “real scientists” and it occurs at a time when many of them have already developed scientific aspirations. They ask questions about how they can improve their research, but also learn about what their judges do and start to envision career options that can become life choices shortly.

There are only winners at these events. The interactions are fun, the projects are interesting, the students are appreciative of guidance and advice, and the future of science is unquestionably improved. For those who like to volunteer, judging science fairs is a most fulfilling way to spend a couple of hours of one’s time. For those who don’t volunteer often, science fairs provide a great way to get involved and give a little back to society without making any large time commitments or long-term promises. The judges, the children, our society, and our company all benefit from our increased involvement in science fairs. I highly recommend getting involved and hope others will think about giving it a try.