

Three teams at top of math competition in Niskayuna

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Capital Region middle school students compete in the fast-paced Countdown Round of the MATHCOUNTS regional qualifying competition Saturday afternoon at GE's Global Research Center in Niskayuna.

NISKAYUNA — More than 120 students from 14 area middle schools put their problem-solving skills to the test Saturday in the national MATHCOUNTS competition at GE's Global Research Center in Niskayuna.

The students spent the morning with pencils, papers and calculators competing in both team and individual events to see who would move on to the state-level competition and, after that, the national level.

After lunch, parents were welcomed to watch the students compete in the Countdown Round, a more active, game show-style competition that, while not counting toward advancement in the competition, gave the students a chance to show off their rapid-fire math skills before their peers and family.

"It's impressive," said Vrinda Rajiv, a computer scientist at GE and leading organizer of the event. "It's not just the knowledge, it's the speed and agility with which they can understand the question and then answer it."

Farnsworth Middle School in Guilderland took the No. 1 spot in the team round this year, followed by the Albany Academies at No. 2 and Iroquois Middle School in Niskayuna at No. 3. All three will advance to the state-level competition, as well as two individual students, Yeon Woo Kim and Rubin Chen, who were not affiliated with a team.

The competition has been held for the past 32 years by the national MATHCOUNTS program, which aims to improve math skills among middle school students. This year, the Capital Region qualifier was sponsored by GE Volunteers and the Capital District Chapter of the New York State Society of Professional Engineering.

Students on MATHCOUNTS teams at local middle schools have been working hard in preparation since the fall, not only staying after school during the week, but even going in on weekends to sharpen their skills.

“It’s like sports — it’s something you work hard at, you get better at, and you can see yourself improve,” said Saturday’s guest of honor, Masako Yamada, manager of the advanced computing lab at GE. “Not just the kids, but the coaches, the scorers — they have invested a lot into this.”

Twelve-year-old Joy Lim, a seventh-grader at Iroquois Middle School, said she has been putting a lot of time into improving her math skills lately. After last season, one of her coaches said, she really committed herself to practicing math.

“It’s just one of those things that I’ve been trying to be good at,” she said. “I practice a lot, just go on the Internet and do some problems.”

Her work paid off. Joy took first place in the high-pressure Countdown Round against many students with a few years on her.

“It was very impressive and I’m thrilled that she won today, because there’s no one who deserves it more than she does,” said 16-year-old Gideon Schmidt, a sophomore at Niskayuna High School who helps coach the school’s MATHCOUNTS team.

“I think we had eight people graduate last year, so our team is entirely sixth- and seventh-graders,” he said after the competition. “We weren’t sure if we were going to make states, but we were top three, and we’re really pleased.”

Schmidt participated in MATHCOUNTS when he was in middle school, and said the experience has shaped his life since. He plans to pursue some kind of math or engineering in college, he said.

“It definitely helped me become who I am,” he said. “I learned to compete, I learned to solve a lot of cool math problems, and I just met a lot of cool people. Almost everything I do, I can say, ‘Yes, MATHCOUNTS helped me with this.’”

The state finals will take place at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute campus in Troy on March 28.