

Science Fair Judge

Holy Redeemer Middle School, Montrose

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Teacher: Beth Cohen

Volunteers: Thomas Ader, Jennifer Buz, Brandon Schmandt

Thomas Ader: Judging a science fair is a great experience, a great way to interact with kids, and doesn't require any kind of preparation. I teamed up with a schoolteacher who had previously judged a few science fairs, so she was used to kids that age and what to expect from them. I was very impressed by the creativity and the dedication of most of the kids, and by the ease with which some of them were able to present their work. Although the subjects picked were extremely diverse, and far from my field for a lot of them, the scientific process is always the same (question, hypothesis, testing/experimentation, conclusion) and as a result the judging is not hard. As grad students we are able to provide the kids with valuable advice. Most of the time, the projects issues were related to experiments that didn't really isolate the parameter to be tested, or projects where not enough experiments were conducted for the results to be significant. It was thus interesting to drag the kids attention on parameters that could affect their experiments, ask them if they could have done their experiments differently or see if they could draw different conclusion from their results. For me it was also extremely interesting to see how kids that age can explain phenomena (such as electricity, sound propagation, chemical reactions, etc.) with their own words. It was also very interesting to see from a judge point of view what makes a project look more or less interesting. Being a student, I feel that I don't have this kind of experience very often, which comes yet so valuable when I have to present my own work!

Jennifer Buz: The students had a wide variety of projects, some standard science fair projects, and some projects that solved problems pertaining to their lives. Each judge had a partner and had their own separate scoring sheet. We were given a rubric for judging the students and assigned them number scores for each of the categories (poster, presentation, research, data, etc.). Some parent volunteers added the scores for the students and gave us back the top 5 scorers. From the top 5 scores we then selected which of the students would get 1st, 2nd, 3rd. They allowed for ties which was nice and encouraged giving more awards. I would advise future science fair judges to hold back from giving perfect scores because you never know what you're going to see next. I had to go back and re-score some of the projects I had seen because I was totally blown away with later ones. I would also suggest giving higher scores to more unique projects that are particularly relevant to the student's life (which require creativity in solving the problem) as opposed to a complex science project with no meaning to them (because often these come from science fair project books).

Brandon Schmandt: When I arrived I was assigned to judge ~20 science fair projects, which represented all the entries from their 7th grade class. I was paired with another judge (a parent with a child in a different grade), and each student gave us about a five-minute presentation and then we had a few minutes for questions/discussion. I was glad that I arrived about 20 minutes early and had a chance to look over the projects before I started judging, in retrospect this really helped me get a feel for where the students were in their science education and the typical quality of the projects. Some students were eager to present all the details of their work, while others required a few more guiding questions. It was a fun experience and the 4 hours went by quickly.