

AS SEEN IN

Midwest Living®

OCTOBER 2005

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE 31 WINNERS IN OUR SECOND CHAMPIONS IN EDUCATION™ CONTEST, LED BY THE GRAND-PRIZE WINNER: A CHICAGO-AREA SCIENCE EVENT THAT'S GROWING QUICKLY.

Meet Our Champions

KIDS CROWD AROUND a table to gape at tiny tornadoes whirling in a bottle. Kindergartners squeal in delight as they touch a worm's skin. Fourth- and fifth-graders studiously examine an overturned plant, an empty soda can and a shoe print—all evidence in the Case of the Missing Scissors.

This is the evening students and parents have waited for all year at Edison Elementary. It's time for the Edison Science Olympiad (ESO), an event that builds more excitement than sporting events or holiday parties at this school of 325 students in the Chicago suburb of Elmhurst. The program started in 2001 has boosted participation among kids and volunteers, gained national attention and proven that fun science is sure to inspire kids.

The two-hour ESO extravaganza engages kindergarten through fifth-grade students in hands-on science activities with names like Science Crime Busters, As the Worm Turns and Don't Bug Me. Parents Patti Reher and Jenny Kopach and fifth-grade teacher Mavis Barkley created the Science Olympiad to improve on Edison's traditional science fair. The old PTA Family Science Night featured homemade experiments and projects that required hours of planning and work for the students and families. Patti started reworking the idea into a non-competitive event that would inspire children while teaching physics, chemistry, biology and anatomy.

"It's about making science fun and exposing kids to new ideas and possibly new career choices," Patti says.

In five years, the ESO has grown into an event that involves more than 75 percent of the student body, 120 volunteers and guests, including local scientists, zoologists, criminologists and pilots. Many guests also are parents of Edison students. Jenny and Patti planned the Science Olympiad for evenings so working parents could attend.

"Part of the appeal to parents is that it is a smaller time commitment," Patti says. "It's a concentrated amount. Almost everyone is available to help for two hours on one weekday evening."

People often ask Jenny how she secures guests—including an American Airlines flight educator and a local forensic expert—to

The \$10,000 award will go directly to Edison Elementary School.

spend an evening at an elementary school. "Everything is done out of the love of their hearts and for the love of science," she says. "People are coming because they believe in the program."

Other Elmhurst schools are noticing Edison's program. During the past year, Jenny and Patti presented their Science Olympiad manuals to the district's seven other elementary schools, and five adopted similar events.

Edison also caught the attention of the National Science Olympiad, an organization known for national science competitions at the junior high and high-school level. The national group decided to sell the ESO's manual to schools nationwide. While all the

attention and progress is appreciated, Jenny measures ESO's success in another way.

"I always gauge success by the smiles on their [the children's] faces," she says. "We're looking for a positive connection to science at a young age, so they won't lose the wonderment and awe that comes with these events."

By Jessica Dunham

Photographs: Bob Stefko

\$10,000 Grand-prize winners
PATTI REHER AND JENNY KOPACH
Edison Science Olympiad
Edison Elementary School Elmhurst, Illinois