

Niles Township middle schools compete in first-ever robotics tourney of its kind



Eighth grader Michael Lohan, 13, of Clarence E. Culver Elementary School located in Niles, right, competes against Lincoln Junior High School sixth grader Hayden Lindsay, 12, at the first Little 9 robotics tournament Tuesday, March 6, 2018 at Lincoln Junior High School in Skokie. (Pioneer Press)

By **Pioneer Press**
Staff Report

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A spirited competition among middle school age students from different districts was recently waged but not with the usual basketball or football, but rather handmade robots maneuvered with remote controls.

The first of what educators insist will be an annual "Little 9" robotics competition held March 6 included students from schools that serves as feeders for Niles Township High School District 219.

"We're trying to incorporate robotics and coding into all of our science curriculum," said Terry Stroh, the kindergarten through 12th grade director of science curriculum and instructional supervision for NTHS Dist. 219.

"We want the kids to have an experience working with robotics, with coding, with computers and problem solving in the context of real world problems. So we want to give them a taste of it now to see if they even like

these kind of things," he said.

Stroh added that the new competition meshes with the goal of the high school

The participating schools included: Lincoln Junior High in Skokie, School District 69; Park View School in Morton Grove, School District 70; Fairview South Elementary School in Skokie, School District 72; Clarence E. Culver School in Niles, School District 71; and Old Orchard Junior High School in Skokie, School District 68.

Organizers from Lincoln Junior High School, where the competition was held, believe that all area districts will eventually participate so that the competition lives up to its name in the future.

Robotics programs have been on the rise over the last few years at Niles Township schools as part of a bigger focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) learning, educators say.

Therese Block, who teaches robotics and design and modeling at Lincoln Junior High, said that NTHS Dist. 219 has had much success with its robotics teams. It was her idea to sponsor the after school event, which drew excited children from all over the township.

Block said the idea would never have emerged if it were not for both high schools having "booming programs."

"The kids coming up to high school wanted to be involved," she said. "They would get to high school and say they didn't even know they had a robotics program like that. So now that we're starting in the middle schools, the high schools will be even better."

Some middle school kids have already been involved in competitive robotics. The high schools compete in the VEX Robotics competitions, which are open to sixth through 12th graders, Block said.

"Some of my eighth graders did participate in that competition," she said. "It's extremely intense and requires a lot of skill. The kids in the high school work months on it."

Lincoln, in fact, recently placed second in the state in the middle school division, Block said.

The March 6 competition, however, was more for beginners. Students — many but not all of them wearing respective school T-shirts — descended on the Lincoln Junior High gym where two platforms were set up for one-on-one matches.

Two students on opposite sides of a platform tried to get their robots to pick up footballs and round balls and place them over a wall in a concentrated time, which mirrors VEX and other competitions.

Twenty-three teams competed from the five schools including Lincoln with seven teams, Fairview South with five teams, Park View School with four teams, Old Orchard Junior High School with four teams and Culver school with three teams.

Most of them appeared that they do. When students weren't competing themselves, they watched their classmates and cheered them on like they were at a football or basketball game.

Lincoln has had its robotics program for two years. Other districts have had theirs for varying amounts of time, Stroh said.

What they all share in common, he said, is the excitement the program generates.

"Now, they don't just sit in the classroom to learn science but they have a place to apply what they learn," he said.

Michael Horowitz, who has had grandchildren in School Dist. 69, has volunteered with Lincoln's robotics program since the beginning because of having a technical background.

"On the technical side, I can help the kids out," he said. "But more than that, what I've seen happen is that because each of these robots is being developed by a team, the kids are learning teamwork, communication, planning, perseverance — all kinds of character building going on."

Lincoln Junior High School Principal Lorenzo Cervantes said the students' enthusiasm for robotics really picked up last year when they traveled to competitions. This year, the school had two goals — to keep competing and to keep the momentum going around robotics by getting more people involved, he said.

"This (competition) helps accomplish that," he said.

While two Lincoln teams won the top prizes and a Park View and Culver team came in third and fourth respectively, educators concluded there was a larger win involved.

Asked for a prediction before the competition began, Horowitz said, "my prediction is that this is going to be a win for every kid who participates."

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