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MY VIEW

Robert Nesslin:

Competition prepares leaders of tomorrow

Robert Nesslin, an appraiser for Destination Imagination and an associate professor at Medaille College, lives in Buffalo.

During this time of stimulus packages, allow me to share a “stimulus” activity producing enduring results. Each year, thousands of students attending grammar school through college in the United States, Canada, England, Europe, Southeast Asia and South America join Destination Imagination and enter a team-building, problem-solving competition.

Each student group chooses a particular challenge from a list created by the organization. The challenges are highly diverse and complex, and range from engineering to structure building or improvisational performances.

An adult team leader helps guide the group’s process, and is a sounding board, when asked. The overall responsibility for completing the challenge lies solely with the group members. Preparation starts in November, with competitions starting in March.

Contributions from parents, friends, and fundraisers help offset expenses for materials and travel costs. The groups often look for donations of items to be used in creating props and backdrops.

Thought-provoking analysis, creativity, ingenuity and leadership are essential ingredients for success. Once the processes needed to fulfill the challenge are agreed upon, each member assumes responsibility for different areas. Trial-and-error experiments help to fine tune the elements. While individual talents are celebrated, the goal is teamwork.

The group presents its challenge solution in the form of a “skit,” about 10 minutes long. Appraisers are appointed to rate specific challenges within all student levels. Following the presentation, the appraisers meet with group members to ascertain how each contributed to the work and gauge the group’s effectiveness.

Each group must also complete an “instant challenge.” An appraiser shares the challenge outline about a topic that the group has not previously seen. Creativity reigns supreme. The group acts out the challenge within a tight time limit. Appraisers grade the outcome. As an appraiser, I see this as a superb way to prepare our young people for the unanticipated challenges of life.

There are three progressive competitions — local, state and global finals. The top two local groups in a given challenge and grade level proceed to state, and those finalists proceed to global.

My wife and I have attended the local, state and global finals for the past two years. It’s an awesome experience as a grandparent and appraiser to witness so many well-planned performances. Global finals are an international microcosm of young people. Keen competition is bolstered by genuine camaraderie. Last year, when someone destroyed a New York State team’s props, other teams donated materials and supported the group by attending its performance.

Between challenges, attendees trade pins from their respective country in a spirit of internationalism. There are few language or other barriers, often resulting in forming lasting friendships. These valuable lessons contribute to understanding the differences and inherent likenesses of their peers, who may be tomorrow’s leaders.

Participants in Destination Imagination are preparing themselves to meet future challenges. As a former corporate executive, I know that people who are creative, willing to learn, apply their talents to tasks and participate in teamwork would rate high when being considered for a position.

This “stimulus package” profits everyone since it is a powerful catalyst in preparing our youth for building the future and assuming leadership roles.