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In Budget Crunch, Science Fairs Struggle to Survive

By EMMA GRAVES FITZSIMMONS

DARIEN, Ill. — When one team's model helicopter broke before a recent science competition here, the students made a replacement at the last minute using a pizza box and a rubber band.

Things do not always go as planned at the competition, which one teacher called a "track-and-field event for nerds." But a high school sophomore, John Hickernell, said he was happy just to be at the event, the Illinois Science Olympiad, after one team had to back out at the last minute because members could not raise enough money to attend.

"I'm upset about my event," John said. "Imagine not even getting to compete at all."

Securing financing for these competitions and for the time-honored local science fair has become increasingly difficult because of the poor economy, organizers say. Sponsors have dropped out of local science fairs, while some schools are scaling back extracurricular activities, including science programs, because of state budget cuts.

In Missouri, two prominent science fairs in the St. Louis area are having financing problems after losing corporate donations. One California school district did not have a science fair last school year, and Louisiana's statewide competition was almost canceled last spring.

"The donations are down dramatically this year," said Jill Malcom, the director of the Mastoridon Art and Science Regional Fair, one of the St. Louis-area competitions. "We are doing whatever it takes to keep the fair going."

Science programs are more important than ever because the country needs students who are interested in science to compete in the global economy, said Paula Golden, the director of the Broadcom Foundation, which finances a prominent national science competition for middle school students.

"Without a body of young people who are innovators and scientists and engineers, we cannot sustain any kind of growth economically," Ms. Golden said. "It is a national crisis."

The Society for Science & the Public, a nonprofit group that holds an annual international science fair, does not track local science fair financing issues, but a spokesman said the group had received feedback regarding problems.

“I certainly hear all the time that schools are challenged to have science fairs — for financial reasons or because they have to focus on testing,” said the spokesman, Rick Bates.

The Alvord Unified School District in Riverside, Calif., did not hold a science fair last school year because of budget cuts. Students and teachers were disappointed, but officials had to make cuts somewhere, said Cynthia Glover Woods, the district’s director for elementary education.

The district did not plan to hold a science fair this school year until the Alvord Educational Foundation stepped in and offered to find sponsors. The president of the foundation, Grey Frandsen, said he could not believe that students were missing out on a formative experience.

“Here in Southern California, our economy has been decimated,” he said. “The science and technology fields are some areas of bright hope.”

In Louisiana, the regional and statewide science fairs scheduled for last spring were almost canceled. When Louisiana State University lost financing in the state budget, officials eliminated the programs but then reinstated them with private financing.

The Academy of Science — St. Louis Science Fair, scheduled for the spring, lost half of its financing when the pharmaceutical company, Pfizer, withdrew as a sponsor after giving \$65,000 last school year. Organizers said they were hopeful that another donor would come forward.

The fair’s director, Mary E. Burke, pointed to the two students it sent to an international science fair last school year as examples of how fairs inspire students. One student tested the DNA of a plant he found while traveling in China and determined that it was an unidentified species. Another student got an internship at a laboratory at Washington University in St. Louis after she did a project about why some of her relatives had diabetes and others did not.

“We tell the families that when your child goes ‘huh’ and wonders about this or that, write it down. That is a science project,” Ms. Burke said. “Those are the projects they really love that make them realize science is fun.”

The Mastodon fair has lost dozens of sponsors. Its budget has dropped from \$250,000 last year to \$118,000 for the March fair. Ms. Malcom, the fair’s director, is scrounging for money to buy the \$3 medals for second- and third-place winners and worrying about how to fund scholarships.

“This event really can be the spark that changes a kid’s life,” Ms. Malcom said.