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Districts Battling Gang Violence Take High Honors In National Science Competition

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BRENTWOOD, N.Y. (CBSNewYork) — Districts plagued with gang violence took high honors in one of the most prestigious science competitions in the nation.

Focus and drive are the main ingredients in a successful science research project, but they can be tough to tap in high school students with real life obstacles.

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“Homelessness, we have students who are immigrants who English is not their first language,” Dr. Rebecca Grella said.

In a place known more for gang horrors than academic honors, Brentwood High School and neighboring Central Islip now count three semifinalists in the prestigious Siemens competition.

Just eight years ago, Brian Torres fled El Salvador.

“We found out how the chemicals found in soap are dangerous to mussels found in coastal communities,” he told CBS2’s Carolyn Gusoff.

Pastor Martinez has devised a cleaner hydrogen cell.

“There were many days I’d have one to four hours sleep and then go to school, but working hard you can’t avoid it,” he said.

Hard work is essential, but in some communities basics can be unavailable.

“Many of our lab sites are out in the field. Our students don’t have transportation,” Dr. Grella said.

The districts earned grants to build their own labs, and now partner with more affluent school districts.

“They can achieve the highest of high by working with someone that may have a little more than they do. You can’t compare yourself to someone else, be what you want to be,” she said.

The schools know what they’re up against — more affluent districts churn out finalists each year, often start students years earlier, have state of the art labs, and parents with more resources.

That doesn’t matter to semifinalist Anthonyne Metelus who measured the effect of pesticides on worms.

“It makes me want to work even harder because I want to prove to everyone else, just because I don’t have what they have, I can’t do what they do. I can’t do it and I can do it better,” he said.

“It says to them; there is absolutely nothing you cannot accomplish,” Central Islip School District Superintendent, Dr. Howard Koenig added.

All three semifinalists are the first in their families to take their focus and drive to college.

There were 491 semifinalists in the competition, Long Island had 56 of them. On Wednesday, 11 advanced to the regional finals.



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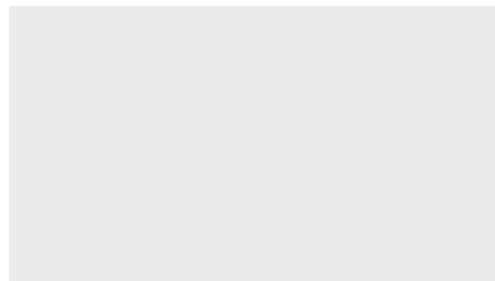
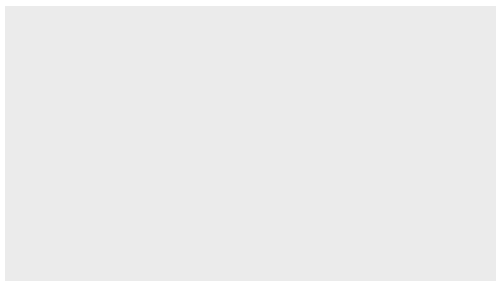
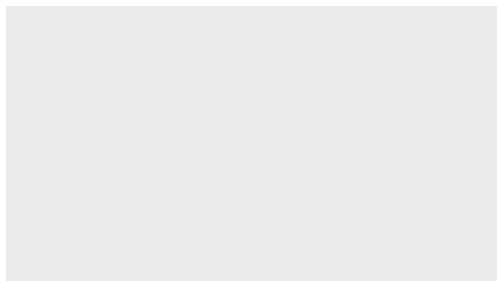
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