



Christopher Columbus Awards: Changing Lives, Changing Communities

Impact on Lives Across America

The Christopher Columbus Awards have touched the lives of thousands of students across the U.S. over the past 11 years. Some of these students have gone on to study science or another technical field, have obtained or filed for U.S. patents for their entries, and have brought their ideas to life in their communities. Many of them have continued to be “everyday” kids, the kind who never thought they could enter, much less win, a national academic competition, but who nonetheless did, and were forever changed by the experience.

Perhaps the most profound thing these thousands of students have done over the years is touch the lives of thousands of other students, teachers, parents, superintendents and community leaders by their determination and energy, and their enthusiasm for making positive change in their communities. Through this program, they’ve managed to reach people all over the country, in their classrooms, in their hometowns, and across the U.S., and they’ve inspired many others to take notice. For example:

- President George W. Bush annually sends congratulatory letters to the finalists to commend them as examples of community volunteering that could inspire others to get involved.
- President Bill Clinton invited one of the winners to sit next to First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton during a State of the Union Address.
- Oprah Winfrey awarded a winning team of Native American girls a matching \$25,000 grant to help build their study hall on the Crow Indian Reservation in Montana; she also hosted this team on her show in 2002.
- Governors of many states including Pennsylvania, New York, Wisconsin and Ohio, have made personal visits with the students and held them up as examples of what’s right with education and kids these days.
- Teachers have committed hundreds of hours year after year to enter this program, which has guidelines more rigorous than many other academic competitions.
- Parents and whole communities have gotten involved in the students’ cause as volunteers and encouraged others to do the same.
- Perhaps most profoundly, a 12-year-old boy who was a member of the second-place team awarded in Florida in June 2002, died of cancer early the next year. He was buried wearing his medal from the competition because it had been, according to him, the best experience of his life.

The return on this competition reaches far beyond 2,000 kids each year—it touches a whole nation in so many compelling ways.

Sustained Growth

Through the partnership of a committed sponsors and contractors, the awards have grown over the years, with more than 14,000 students entering the competition to date. A loyal following of coaches has gained momentum over the years as well with a nearly 30 percent return rate each year.

Under-Reached Girls Are the Majority Here

The diversity of the entrants is unparalleled in science-based competitions—more than half of the entrants are girls, and nearly a quarter of them are from minority populations, including African Americans, Pacific Islanders, Hispanics and Native Americans.

Highlights

The following summary highlights how the program has changed the lives of thousands of students, coaches, teachers, parents and communities. In many cases, these are not changes that last a brief week, a month or a year. For most, the experience has been a transition that will last a lifetime.

Some highlights from the competition's 11-year history:

- Participation in the program has increased by 31 percent since the competition's inception.
- One of the few competitions that encourages teamwork and has students apply the scientific method to everyday problems. The competition is open to and attracts all types of middle school students, not just top-performing science students.
- Has routinely attracted a high percentage of female participants. Since its founding, the competition has attracted and maintained a 59 percent female participation rate.
- Ideas and projects developed by these middle school students are significant and meaningful, with teams to date securing six U.S. patents and two provisional patents, plus one application for a patent is in progress.
- The number of Hispanic and Asian participants increases yearly—7 percent of all past participants are Hispanic and 9 percent of past participants are Asian.
- Consistent urban and rural participation each year. In the current competition year, urban and rural schools make up 34 percent of the schools that participate.
- Strong loyalty and following among the coaches (usually teachers) who have implemented the program—23 percent return rate.

Media Reach

Each year, through print, broadcast and online media, the competition reaches tens of millions of people across the U.S., typically parents, teachers and students. National media coverage of this program has been substantial and includes “**The Today Show**,” “**The Oprah Winfrey Show**,” *Time Magazine/Time for Kids* magazine and *National Geographic*, among others.

What Others Have to Say About the Program

Students

“Our victory showed us that anything is possible. I now encourage young people to never give up on their dreams, and never underestimate what they are capable of doing. We gave hope to teens in our community to succeed outside the boundaries of our reservation and courage to pursue what can seem to be impossible.”

Lucretia Birdinground—Crow Indian Reservation, Montana
2001 participant for building a community study hall out of straw bale

“Thank you for teaching me how to make my dreams become reality.”

Alex Lin—Westerly, Rhode Island
2005 participant who created a plan to deactivate and dispose of E-Waste

“Before the competition, I was a really shy kid. I would never be a leader. After the competition, I came out of my shell. I could talk in front of people, be a leader, and I was not scared anymore.”

Ben Donnell—Whiteface, Texas
2006 participant for a plan to improve teen safety while riding all-terrain vehicles

“The Christopher Columbus Awards inspire creativity, excitement and inquisition, while teaching responsibility, maturity, teamwork and other valuable skills...an experience I will not forget for the rest of my life.”

Lauren Schulz—Cold Springs Harbor, New York
1998 participant for solving the problem of overweight backpacks
with a design that better distributes the weight

Coaches

“This program has provided an avenue for me as a science and math teacher to show direct connections between all subject areas and ‘real-life’ applications.”

Jon Hood, 2001 Finalist Coach
Hot Rots
Bexley Middle School
Bexley, Ohio

“The Christopher Columbus Awards program offers kids the opportunity to exceed and excel and to show the true value of what they are inside. It’s a way to show they can do something and make a change.”

Andon Pogoncheff, 1999 & 2000 Finalist Team Coach
Light for Life & Rescuer teams
Pattengill Middle School
Lansing, Michigan

“This competition is a model of community service and citizenship for middle school students across the country.”

M.J. Savaiano, 1997 Finalist Team Coach
Milfoil Madness Team
Clara Barton Open School
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Parents

“What started as an academic assignment turned into a real-world experience. As a parent, I thank you for providing this opportunity for students. My only regret is that not all schools give their students a chance to learn to use this approach to problem solving.”

Robin Taylor
Parent, 2002 Student Finalist
Manassas, Virginia

“So much attention today is given to athletics and athletes, it is inspiring to see a program such as this that rewards academic pursuit as well as hard work – particularly one which has a premise of achieving a social good. Our society would be so much better if other companies and organizations aligned their priorities to those that contributed to this initiative.”

Joe & Pat Voellinger
Parents, 2002 Student Finalist
Minocqua, Wisconsin

*“I have enclosed a letter from the Highland Park Mayor’s Public Safety Advisor addressed to my son, Colin. I thought that you might like to know **that this group of twelve year-old boys has already influenced change in their community.** We are all very proud of their hard work and commitment to the well-being of their community.”*

Donna Serbe-Davis
Parent, 2003 Student Finalist
Highland Park, New Jersey