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Falls fourth-graders top state team in national competition

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Sheboygan Falls Elementary School students on Wednesday rallied around 22 fourth-graders who recently placed first in Wisconsin in a national online math competition.

The online competition, "First in Math," is made up of 24 multilevel and colorful games that are played individually by first- through eighth-grade students. The Sheboygan Falls students competed against 161 Wisconsin schools. Nationally 10,000 teams and 250,000 students were in the competition.

"This is phenomenal," said Michelle Dawson, math teacher and the team's coach. "It became a real motivator just because of the competition element. ... They just were so competitive and motivated to stay in first that as other teams got closer, they'd push harder."

Sheboygan Falls was one of 100 Wisconsin schools awarded a yearlong grant to run the program and compete against students at all grade levels across the nation.

Nicknamed Team "solar21wi," the students are the highest performing fourth-graders in math at Sheboygan Falls. They ranked first in the state throughout the entire competition.

When the competition ended on April 30, they had also ranked first in their grade level in the state, third among fourth-graders in the U.S. and 10th among all teams in the country.



Barbara Asteak, vice president of Suntex International Inc., coaches Jacob Barthels, 10, at an awards ceremony at Sheboygan Falls Elementary School for the First in Math online mathematics competition. Barthels' team placed first in Wisconsin in the nation-wide competition.

Pennsylvania-based Suntex originated the math program.

Press photo/Sam Castro

The school was awarded \$500 from Suntex, plaques for the school and for Dawson, and medals for all students, plus an additional medal for the top five ranking students.

Robert Sun, president of Pennsylvania-based Suntex and inventor of the math program, told students that math is a universal language, which helped him interact with students when he moved to the U.S. from Shanghai and didn't speak English.

"Math is all about relationships and we need to intrigue children in discovering it

on their own," Sun said. "The reason I'm so proud to be here is because you set an example ... you're strengthening the very fabric of this present nation of ours."

Sun said the students solved more than 300,000 mathematics problems.

The students were assigned a login name and password to access "First in Math" from other computers. They competed during recess and at home.

After the ceremony the kids buzzed around Sun, asking him to sign their T-shirts and the ribbon that held their medals.

Jacob Barthels, 10, who ranked first on the team, said it felt "pretty good" to be a winner and he was anxious to compete next year. Barthels spent hours online at home problem solving for the game, said his mother Linda Barthels, 44.

"Really in the last three weeks is when it really picked up," she said. "He's been in sports and 4-H ... but this is the biggest thing he's competed in in his life.

Emma Schad, 10, who placed fourth on the team, said she wouldn't have made it that far had it not been for her parents' help.

Tony Rizzi-Murphy, 10, who ranked second on the team, said, "I feel like I set an example for many people."

Other dignitaries attending the rally were Sheboygan Falls Mayor Randy Meyer, Sen. Joe Leibham, R-Sheboygan, several Sheboygan Falls School Board members and Barbara Asteak, vice president of Suntex, served as master of ceremonies.

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