

STEM students tackle NASA space robotics challenge

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Early Friday morning, North Idaho STEM Charter Academy Zero Robotics team members gathered at the Rathdrum school around two large monitors. On both screens were direct communication lines to NASA and the International Space Station.

After a summer of competitive coding, the North Idaho STEM students were about to make a run for the national title in a robotics challenge sanctioned by NASA and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The competition commenced and North Idaho STEM team's code earned them the second-place spot in the nation, behind Massachusetts.

The Zero Robotics Summer SPHERES Program prepared the students for the competition. Students worked to write a code that could control a piece of equipment aboard the International Space Station. At the state level, North Idaho STEM beat Woodland Middle School in Coeur d'Alene and Meridian Middle School for the shot at the national title.

Students from Canfield, Woodland and Lakeland High School attended to show support and watch the code written by North Idaho STEM students function in space.

"I thought it would be outside of the space station. I didn't know they would be actual spheres inside the space station," said Taylor Roberts a seventh-grader from Woodland. "I think that's really cool."

Christopher Hartman, an eighth-grader at North Idaho STEM, spent his summer preparing for the competition. Hartman is also a competitive swimmer, but said he finds his main interest is in technology and Zero Robotics.

"I really like robotics and I think this is like the supreme robotics experience," Hartman said. "Especially at the middle school level."

Zero Robotics at STEM Charter is instructed by Dave Johnson. He also teaches social studies and



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Dave Johnson, North Idaho STEM Charter Academy Zero Robotics instructor, excitedly discusses code with Ian Stewart of Woodland Middle School during a national robotics challenge Friday morning in Rathdrum. Sitting beside Ian, from front, are Taylor Roberts, Christopher Hartman and Daniel Simmons.

enjoys helping his students learn about code and robotics.

He said he is proud of the kids and what they have accomplished thus far - interacting with NASA is the payoff for their hard work.

"I love the kids and love what they're doing," Johnson said. "I always tell them that they can be the first one on their block to go to space, which, indirectly, they are."

Daniel Simmons, an eighth-grader at STEM Charter, said he was grateful for the opportunity to be in the finals and he was enjoying the whole experience.

"I think it's awesome that we made it this far," Simmons said. "We made it two years ago and got third place, so it's good to just be back here."

For those gathered at STEM Charter on Friday there were no winners or losers, just kids who are figuratively reaching for the stars while writing code that literally reached space.

The pride was obvious in their eyes as they watched their work being implemented on a spacecraft. What wasn't apparent was their realization of how extraordinary their middle school feat was.

Johnson said he has no doubt these students will continue on to great things. He said there is a stigma with students who excel in technology-related fields, but he said people need to remember one thing.

"Some people call them tech geeks," Johnson said. "I say they are the people who will be hiring others one day. They are the future leaders."