

Math contest attracts students

BY Julie Anderson
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

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Marrs Magnet Middle School students Brenda Esqueda, left, and Anna Vu wait for the answer to a tie-breaker question in Thursday's math contest.

MATT MILLER/THE WORLD-HERALD

First came the question: What is the greatest common factor of 40 and 64?

Roughly 250 sixth-graders in 51 teams — representing 32 schools from nine metro-area school districts — crunched the numbers, aided only by tablet-sized dry erase boards. They punched in their answers on remote clickers.

The answer flashed on a screen in front of the auditorium: 8.

“Yeah!” shouted those who'd gotten it right.

“Pretty interesting to watch kids get fired up about math,” said Keith Bigsby, principal of McMillan Magnet Center.

Math, though, is part of what McMillan is all about. And Thursday's quiz bowl-style contest was half of the school's annual sixth-grade math contest.

Part open house, the contest kicks off the school's magnet recruiting season. In past years, it has brought in students from other schools within the Omaha district. There were 29 teams last year. This year the event was expanded to include students from throughout the new two-county learning community.

“We have a lot of opportunities for kids that people would never believe that we have,” said Jill Best, McMillan's magnet coordinator.

To show them off, McMillan students and staff rolled out the welcome mat. They led tours. They temporarily converted the library into a cybercafe where parents and math team coaches could jump onto the Internet, at least as far as the school's filters would allow, read the newspaper and grab a drink or snack.

Terry Christensen's son, Atley, competed on a team from Boyd Elementary. “It's good to offer stuff that's outside of athletics,” he said.

The event, however, was for kids, by kids. Some 70 students from McMillan, which serves seventh- and eighth-graders, helped out by the end of the day.

Student ambassadors helped plan, set up tables and lead tours. Among them was Diamond Martinez, who chose McMillan because it offers architecture classes. Jamilah Adams came “because I heard it was a great opportunity to learn a lot and prepare yourself for high school.”

Twenty students in the math enrichment class wrote 60 questions each for the quiz bowl and the written test, said Connie Colton, math department chairwoman. They started work the second week of school.

Colton moderated the quiz bowl. “By the way,” she said, “it's OK to give a shout out when you get the right answer.”

In the end, there were way more shouts of success than boos of disappointment.