

31 August 2016

MEDIA RELEASE

SA's brightest science pupils battle it out to represent State at national school competition

The search is on today for South Australia's next Andy Thomas – the State's internationally-renowned NASA astronaut and aerospace engineer.

Some of SA's brightest and most inquisitive young minds have converged on Adelaide today (Wednesday, 31 August) to pit themselves against each other in the country's leading school science and engineering competition.

Up to 250 students from around the state aged between 14 and 15 years are participating in the State final of the national Science and Engineering Challenge at Titanium Arena at Findon.

Over the course of the day, the students - representing eight schools from throughout South Australia - will be broken into groups and each given eight separate science/engineering type challenges to undertake.

The school with the overall highest points will go on to represent the State at the national finals in Tasmania in October.

"The Science and Engineering Challenge is aimed at changing students' perceptions of science and engineering," local organising Chair, Mr Ollie Clark, said today.

"Through the Challenge, students experience aspects of science and engineering which they would not usually see in their school environment," he said.

"It aims to inspire students in Years 9 and 10 to consider a future career in science and engineering by choosing to study the STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) in Years 11 and 12."

Now in its 16th year, the Science and Engineering Challenge is a national program organised by the University of Newcastle in New South Wales.

Over its duration, more than 230,000 students from schools across the country have participated in the event.

Each year, initial rounds of the Challenge are held at various locations throughout each state.

The SA Challenge – of which Australian Gas Networks is a major sponsor - involved competitions being held in Port Lincoln, Port Pirie, Mount Gambier, Loxton, Mawson Lakes, Findon and Tonsley and attracted about 2500 students from 80 schools.

From that, winners from each of those regions were selected to compete in the State Final.

Those are Penola, Loxton, Jamestown and Blackwood high schools, and Immanuel, St Peters Girls, St Mary's (Adelaide) and St Joseph's (Port Lincoln) colleges.

At today's state final, students will compete against other schools in "fun and engaging" hands-on activities - such as designing an earthquake proof tower, building a hovercraft, providing electricity to a model city and creating an environmentally friendly house.

Points will be awarded based on their performance and the school with the highest point score is the winner and will go on to represent SA at the national final in October.

"There is clear evidence (from follow up surveys) that the Challenge is having a significant impact on subject choices in later years, with 45% of students indicating their experience influenced them to study physics, 35% chemistry and 25% mathematics," Mr Clark said.

"Overall, 90% of students found the Challenge rewarding and 80% found it informative about potential careers in science and engineering," he said.

As part of its sponsorship, Australian Gas Networks will present the trophy to the winning school at the conclusion of the State Final.

Australian Gas Networks Chief Executive Officer, Mr Ben Wilson, said the company was delighted to be involved in the Science and Engineering Challenge Competition.

"Many brilliant careers have been inspired by a single classroom environment or school subject experience," Mr Wilson said.

"This competition is a wonderful opportunity for thousands of Australian school children to develop their skills and teamwork in a fun and challenging environment," he said

"AGN – and the utility industry generally – relies on a steady supply of young engineers, so this very important school competition fits well with many of our objectives," he said.

"We wish all the competitors the best of luck.

"Who knows, South Australia's next Andy Thomas might be among them."

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