

THS Robotics Team gearing up for New York competition

By Susan Silvers
STAFF WRITER

TRUMBULL — The message was clear to the three designers gathered around a new contraption intended to do some light lifting: Teammates, we have a problem.

"This isn't working, guys," declared Matthew Rescsanski, explaining to colleagues that a crucial metal component was weighing down their design. "The claw has to be able to pick up a pencil that's standing up."

That was the challenge Trumbull High School's Robotics Team faced as it designed and built a series of devices for a May 16 competition in Brooklyn, N.Y. Rescsanski, a junior who plans on a music career but likes engineering, is one of seven boys and five girls who are members of the club.

The students have worked almost daily in recent weeks after school, trying to make sure their devices will be up to battling those created by students from 18 to 20 other schools in the New York metropolitan area.

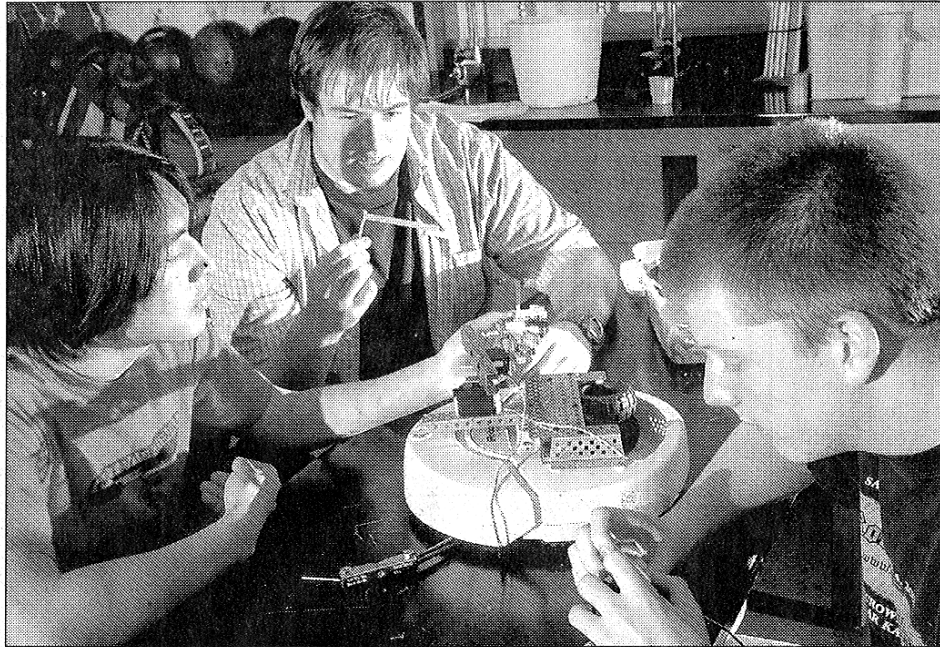
"You've really got to be imaginative to get some of this stuff done," said Ivan Meyerovich, a junior who aspires to be an aerospace engineer. "You've really got to be unconventional to put certain things together."

They also have to be fortunate enough to have the financial backing to pay for the necessary materials and competition fees.

The Robotics Team, and many others in the town's school system, have that backing, thanks to the Academic Challenge for Excellence Foundation, which, since its inception more than five years ago, has raised well over \$100,000 to support such extra-curricular activities.

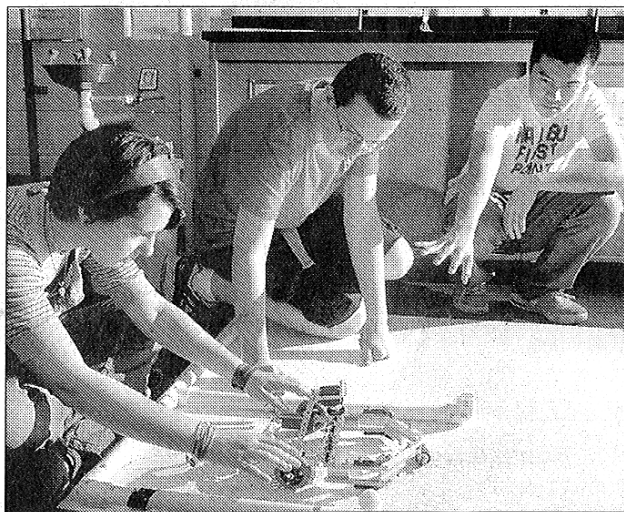
"Academics are the core of school," said Gary Cialfi, the assistant superintendent of schools. He was principal at the high school when ACE was founded and serves as its president. "We have teachers and students that want to go above and beyond. We have to provide resources to go above and beyond."

While support for athletic teams and marching bands is routine in many schools — including Trumbull — Cialfi said students involved in academic endeavors deserve the



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At left, Trumbull High School sophomore Kham Nguyen, junior Ivan Meyerovich, and sophomore Matthew Rescsanski, all members of the school's robotics team, work with one of the robots that they will enter in a regional Botball competition in May. Above, freshman Kate Craddock, freshman Mike Schriefer, and junior Bowen Zheng, all members of the team, work with one of the robots that they will enter in the New York competition.



same kind of support.

Hans Drenkard, the robotics group's adviser, said members lacked focus before ACE provided the \$2,500 to pay for the materials and entrance fees.

The sponsoring organization provides the specific components the students use — computer brains, Legos, wires, the pencils, the devices that pick up, and even the boards on which they operate.

Drenkard hopes THS will place in the top four among the 18 to 20 teams, and perhaps even win.

"It's important for these guys because they are learning adult teamwork for their jobs, whatever they're going to do when they leave here," said Drenkard, a former Avco mechanical engineer who has taught science for about 10 years.

In all, about 300 students in Trumbull schools, even at the elementary level, now participate in ACE-supported activities. The high school and middle school students will be honored at a banquet May 26.

While some of the groups, such as the Debate Club, existed before ACE, many others have taken root since and have had notable success.

For example, Hillcrest Middle School's We the People team won the state championship in the congressional hearing-styled civics contest, the THS Fed Challenge Team, in which students act as mock policy makers, advanced from a preliminary round, as did the Mock Trial Team, in which students argue both sides of a case.

Cialfi said ACE volunteers do more than raise money through projects such as selling town calendars. They also do other things, that range from arranging refreshments for traveling students to acting as practice judges for competitions.

In all, ACE now assists nearly 30 groups of academic competitors.

Though learning is certainly a goal, and their achievements certainly burnish their resumes for college, robotics team member Alex Mark cited other benefits, too. In the end, "it's fun," he said.