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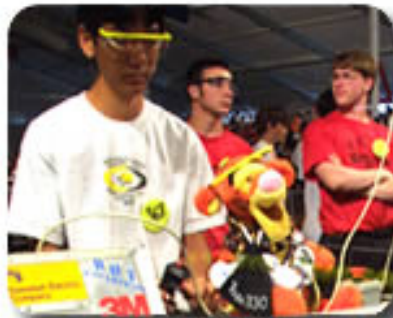
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Teams Race the February Deadline To Design and Build Robots

In what amounts to an engineering sprint, nearly 800 teams of high school students and their engineer mentors are busily designing and building sophisticated robots against a February 18 deadline. The robots will go head-to-head in games at 23 regional competitions across the US and Canada in March and April before continuing to the championship competition April 10-12 in Houston.



A little more than three weeks after FIRST revealed the game rules and distributed over 50 tons of robotics parts, most teams are now well into the building phase, a trying period when teams discover whether the early days of brainstorming competitive machines were actually on target.

[Read the competition update.](#)

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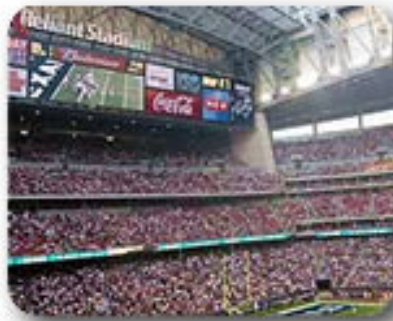
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and open to the public. [Find a regional competition near you.](#)

[Review the complete rules and documents for this year's competition.](#)

"Super Bowl of Smarts" Comes to the Home of the 2004 Super Bowl

The action-packed championship of the FIRST Robotics Competition this year heads for Houston, Texas, taking over Reliant Park, the NFL's newest state-of-the-art domed stadium, for a three-day celebration of science and technology.



FIRST teams will continue to experience Lone Star excitement when Houston's premier family theme park, Six Flags AstroWorld, opens exclusively for their enjoyment on Friday night. Six Flags will again serve up some Texas-sized fun on Saturday night when FIRST attendees are welcomed back for the team dinner.

[Get complete information about the 2003 Championship event.](#)

Beyond Bolts and Ball Bearings: Chairman's Award Honors the FIRST Spirit

There were no robots in sight when team #175 "Buzz Robotics" worked to earn FIRST's highest honor last year. Far from the competition playing field and well outside the team's Connecticut workshop, Buzz won the FIRST Chairman's Award by using Tinkertoy® construction sets to teach elementary students about design and engineering.



The team's accomplishments are a reminder that the FIRST Robotics Competition is about more than robots -- it's about something decidedly more human.

Our Mission

FIRST designs accessible, innovative programs to build self-confidence, knowledge and life skills while motivating young people to pursue opportunities in science, technology and engineering.

Ten years ago we began the FIRST Robotics Competition with 28 teams and a single 14 x 14 foot playing field in a New Hampshire high school gym. Today, we have more than 800 teams participating nationwide and internationally, in 23 regional events and a championship event.

The FIRST LEGO League has expanded its reach from 2,000 to 26,000 children across the United States and over 5,000 children from other countries around the world.

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[Find out more about the Chairman's Award, FIRST's most prestigious honor.](#)

[Submit your team for the Chairman's Award \(PDF, 160K\).](#)

[Review the history of the Chairman's Award.](#)

For Cash-Strapped Teams, Community Support Makes the Difference

Nestled in the mountains of southwestern Virginia is a small coal-mining town named Grundy. Times are hard in Grundy, but thanks to the support of local businesses and a little help from NASA, a FIRST Robotics team has created new opportunities for students there.



In Grundy and other cash-strapped communities where FIRST is poised to make the biggest difference, participation in the robotics competition hinges on local support and national sponsorship. Find out how team #388 from Grundy overcame financial challenges to earn the opportunity to shine.

[Read the full story.](#)

[Find a local team to sponsor.](#)

Companies Realize Returns from Their Generosity

Companies and agencies around the world donate thousands of people hours and hundreds of tons of hardware to make the FIRST Robotics Competition possible. These companies have a shared belief in the FIRST mission and its values of teamwork and gracious professionalism. But they also share a certainty that as organizations, they can do well by doing good.

"It's so important for the future of our company -- and for that matter for our country -- that programs like FIRST are supported by industry," says Craig Muhlhauser, chairman and CEO of Exide Technologies.

[Discover the rewards of becoming a FIRST sponsor or supplier.](#)

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Teams Race the February Deadline to Design and Build Robots

After four years of leading student teams through the FIRST Robotics Competition, teacher Mike Henry believes he has the secret to success: be realistic, stay focused.

"What I tell the team over and over again is, 'We have to build a robot that does just one thing really, really well,'" said Henry, who shepherds team #457 "Team Gamma" of San Antonio, Texas. "In our rookie year, we tried to build a machine that would do everything, but it wound up doing nothing well -- it was bloody awful. You have to learn to make trade-offs, to understand what's realistic in six weeks."

That six weeks is already down to just three. In what amounts to an engineering sprint, nearly 800 teams of high school students and their engineer mentors are busily designing and building sophisticated robots against a February 18 deadline. The robots will go head-to-head in games at 23 regional competitions across the US and Canada in March and April, with 288 teams continuing to the championship competition April 10-12 in Houston, Texas.

A little more than three weeks after FIRST revealed the game rules and distributed over 50 tons of robotics parts, most teams are now well into the building phase, a trying period when teams discover whether the early days of brainstorming competitive machines were actually on target.

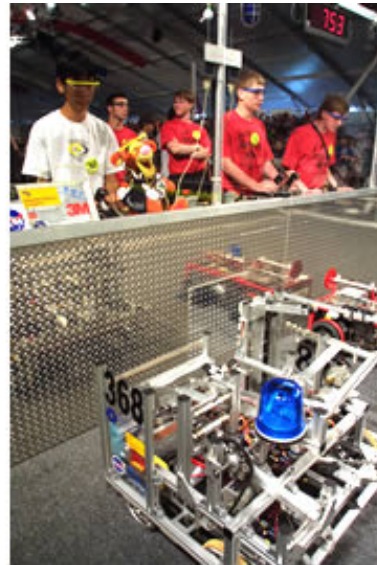
The rubber meets the road

"Students love the brainstorming and design phase; they love to throw around ideas, the crazier the better," Henry said. "But now is the hands-on time when we find out whether the ideas will actually fly. It's hard, because you can never do everything that you imagine you can do, and you have to make decisions about where to scale back."

Even so, Henry admits that this year he and his team of 28 students are hoping to expand on his "do-one-thing-really-well" mantra. "This year we're hoping to do a second thing pretty well, too," he chuckled, describing the team's plans to create an automatic transmission to allow its robot to switch gears.

Team Gamma and other veteran robotics teams enter the competition with a headstart over the 200 rookie teams competing for the first time this year. With robots from past seasons to work with as prototypes and design models, these teams are typically able to get a machine moving more quickly than their first-year counterparts.

"By now all the teams should have a working platform and be working on the design and mechanisms for the game itself," said competition



Teams competing at the 2002 FIRST Robotics Competition.

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director Bob Hammond.

New elements in the game

In this year's game, called "Stack Attack," each team partners with another team to square off against a pair of rival teams. In this two-on-two competition, robots collect plastic containers from the playing field and stack them in their corner. The location of the containers and the height of the stacks after the 2-minute match determine the final score. In a new twist this year, there is a 15-second period when the robots will function on their own without a driver.

"It's the first time we've done it, and it's a fairly complex problem," Hammond said. "As we look at the way the field of engineering is moving, it's more and more common to see machines under their own control. Creating machines that can collect feedback and make decisions is integral, and we wanted the competition to reflect that."

And so, at least in this area, all of the teams are rookies again, grappling with a new engineering problem. The same holds true with the game objects, which in the past have been balls. "This year, you have to figure out how to pick up a plastic tub, how to orient it, how to stack it," Hammond said. "Veteran teams' knowledge of ball-handling doesn't do them much good this year, so that's a bit of a leveling effect."

Teamwork outside the workshop

While a portion of each team juggles motors and bearings and pneumatics in the workshop, their teammates mount a parallel effort outside of it. Instead of designing drive trains and building hardware, this group designs marketing messages and builds community support. Marketing plans, t-shirt designs, websites, computer animations and project documentation will come together over the next three weeks in an effort that gives FIRST a unique multi-disciplinary cast.

"One of the great things about FIRST is that it really allows these students to see where their talents are," said Lucia Sevcik, a volunteer FIRST regional director in Houston, Texas. "Not all of these students are engineers and builders, that's not where their talents lie. But you can see them turning into great project managers or marketers or statisticians.

"That's true for the mentors, too, not just the students," Sevcik added. "When we go out to recruit volunteers and mentors, a lot of them will say, 'But I'm not an engineer; I'm an administrator at my company.' Do we have a job for you! We need people to help these teams develop business plans and project plans."

Indeed, over the course of the FIRST Robotics Competition every team becomes a kind of miniature company, each with departments tasked with a mission to help the entire team move forward.

"This project is so large that you need to divide it into small teams," said Hammond. "These small teams need to work dependently and independently, and they need to have trust in each other. There's a huge lesson in teamwork in this thing."

It's a lesson that's not lost on the FIRST staff, either. At FIRST headquarters in Manchester, NH, there's another organizational feat underway as preparations are made for the competitions. Five tractor trailers will go on the road for six consecutive weeks, carrying all the materials for the playing fields, 30 palettes of trophies, 40 palettes of program books, 7400 yards of carpet and the competition's scoring systems.

2007 Competition Events

View the list of 2007 Competition events [here](#).

"It's a unique logistical challenge getting everything in place for the competitions," Hammond said. "It's like putting on five simultaneous rock tours."

More Information

[Click here for complete rules and documentation about this year's event.](#)

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2003 Championship Welcome Letter

FIRST Robotics Competition Championship April 10-12, 2003 Reliant Park - Houston, TX

FIRST is very excited to be holding the 2003 Championship event at Reliant Park in Houston, Texas. The "Super Bowl of Smarts" comes to the home of the 2004 Super Bowl! Imagine the exhilaration of putting your brainpower and robot "muscle" to the test when you compete in the action-packed final elimination rounds in the newest state of the art, high-tech domed stadium in the NFL. FIRST teams will continue to experience Lone Star excitement when Houston's premier family theme park, Six Flags AstroWorld, opens **exclusively** for your enjoyment on Friday night. Six Flags will again serve up some Texas-sized fun on Saturday night when FIRST attendees are welcomed back for the team dinner.

The city of Houston has welcomed FIRST with open arms. FIRST and The Meeting Company have been working with the Houston business community to offer Championship travel packages that will make competing in Houston affordable and convenient. We are in the process of loading all of the data into the reservation system and plan to open reservations to teams as soon as possible (target date is December 23, 2002). The packages are **VERY** cost effective and we feel they will provide an exceptional value to FIRST teams. Detailed information and instructions on the reservation system will be sent to all Team Travel Coordinators prior to opening reservations.

FIRST and the Meeting Company have also secured the partnership of Continental airlines to be the official air carrier for the Championship event. Continental Airlines is headquartered in Houston and has offered special discounted airfares to FIRST Championship attendees. All FIRST participants, whether you are an individual traveler or a group traveler (10 or more passengers on the same flight) will be able to access special rates through a designated code. To access these special rates and instructions for making airline reservations with Continental Airlines please use the link below.

 [Special Rates and Instructions for Continental Airlines](#) (pdf)

FIRST sincerely thanks everyone for being patient over the past weeks as we were finalizing arrangements for this exciting new 2003 Championship location. We hope that you'll agree that these arrangements have been worth the wait! We encourage everyone to use these packages to make the 2003 Championship competition a success for everyone involved.

Registration for the Championship will open at 9:00 AM EST on Monday, December 9, 2002.

We look forward to seeing y'all in Houston!

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Beyond Bolts and Ball Bearings: Chairman's Award Honors the FIRST Spirit

There were no robots in sight when team #175 "Buzz Robotics" worked to earn FIRST's highest honor last year. Far from the competition playing field and well outside the team's Connecticut workshop, Buzz won the FIRST Chairman's Award by using Tinkertoy® construction sets to teach elementary students about design and engineering.

The team's accomplishments are a reminder that the FIRST Robotics Competition is about more than robots -- it's about something decidedly more human.

"We give our highest award to teams that change the culture of their schools or communities," said FIRST chairman John Abele, who will award FIRST's top honor to one of the teams at the championship competition in Houston. "The Chairman's Award goes to the team that creates the environment for getting the best thinking out of all of the people involved in their adventure of building the robot. This award is what FIRST is all about, and it's the prize that every team should vie for."

Last year, Buzz inaugurated "FIRST Steps," an elementary-school program that uses Tinkertoys® and a FIRST-like challenge to meet curriculum goals. Using construction sets donated by toy-maker Hasbro, Buzz students taught design fundamentals to 250 third- and fourth-grade students in nine local schools.

"There's not a cookie-cutter recipe for winning the Chairman's Award," said Mike Sperber, a Buzz mentor and engineer for the team's chief sponsor, Hamilton Sundstrand Space Systems International. "We did things that represented us and our interests. What teams need to do is find out what they're good at and what they have the power to do to help their community and spread the word about FIRST. Do what you do, and don't be afraid to try something new or to try something that might fail."

Extraordinary teamwork

Since the team's inception in 1996, Buzz has touched the FIRST community with a wide range of innovative programs: a 17-day expo of robot competitions to showcase FIRST and recruit new teams; a "FIRST Aid" program to help rookie teams; a "Safety FIRST" program to encourage teams' use of safety goggles; "Buzz Awards" to give unofficial kudos to other teams; and participation in local walkathons to benefit charity.

Of course, the "Buzz" team knows something about building robots, too. The team has made it to the national competition for four years running. But like all winners of the Chairman's Award, the students,



Top: A Buzz team member gives elementary students a lesson in design and engineering.

Bottom: The Buzz team organized a robotics demonstration at the Eastern States Exposition.

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engineers and teachers from Buzz earned the honor through extraordinary teamwork and a generous spirit.

"When a team helps another team, that's gracious professionalism," said Abele. "That's a mark of a FIRST leadership team, one of the things we recognize with the Chairman's Award."

Spirit of "co-opetition"

Indeed, FIRST Robotics is one of very few competitions with such a strong incentive and culture for helping rival teams. Abele calls this "co-opetition"; FIRST teams call it fun.

"When you get down to it, it's more fun to compete against teams that are ready to compete," said Sperber. "It's no fun if the other team's robot isn't working the way it's supposed to. So it's no big deal to us to help a competitor get their machine up and running -- and then lose to them. If they have the better machine, well, we've learned something along the way."

Learning from each other is a core value of FIRST and the chief characteristic celebrated by the Chairman's Award. Winning teams typically integrate a wide range of school activities and disciplines into their efforts.

"The idea is to break down barriers, to help the students, teachers and engineers understand the power you can have when you do that," said Abele. "When you bring people together, when you discover the resources that others can offer, it's very powerful. FIRST is not about being the smartest or the coolest or the best of the best; it's about understanding and learning from people who have different backgrounds."

Enter the competition

Twenty-three Chairman's Award will be given to teams at the FIRST Robotics Competition regional championships in March and April. At the FIRST championship in Houston, one of those 23 teams will win the championship Chairman's Award.

[Submit your team for the Chairman's Award \(PDF, 160K\)](#)

[Review the history of the Chairman's Award](#)

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Chairman's Award
Embracing the Spirit of FIRST

Since its inception, the FIRST Robotics Competition has been about partnership among people, the impact it has on their lives and appreciation of science and technology. The Chairman's Award recognizes a team's commitment and efforts toward achieving this goal. It remains FIRST's most prestigious award.



Regional Award winners receive Chairman Award medallions and a unique permanent FIRST Chairman's Award Regional trophy. The Championship Chairman's winner receives the Championship medallion and the traveling Chairman's Award clock. Finally, one member of the award-winning team receives a scholarship for up to \$10,000.

2006 Championship Chairman's Award Winner

FIRST is pleased to congratulate and recognize:

Team 111 - ["Wildstang"](#) - Motorola & Rolling Meadows High School & Wheeling High School



(Click on photo to see large version)

HISTORICAL CHAIRMAN'S AWARD WINNERS

2005
67 - ["The HOT Team"](#) - General Motors & Huron Valley Schools

2004
254 - ["Cheesy Poofs"](#) - NASA Ames Research Center/Laron Incorporated/Unity Care Group/Line-X of San Jose/PK Selective Metal

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103 - "[Cybersonics](#)" - NASA/Amplifier Research/Custom Finishers/
Lutron Electronics/BAE Systems & Palisades High School

2002

175 - "[BUZZ](#)" - Hamilton Sundstrand Space Systems International/The
New England Air Museum/Techni-Products/Veritech Media & Enrico
Fermi High School

2001

22 - NASA/JPL/Boeing/Rocketdyne/FADL Engineering/Decker Machine &
Chatsworth High School

2000

16 - Baxter Healthcare Corporation & Mountain Home High School

1999

120 - NASA Lewis Research Center/TRW, Inc./Battelle Memorial
Institute & East Technical High School

1998

23 - Boston Edison & Plymouth North High School

1997

47 - Delphi International & Pontiac Central High School

1996

144 - Procter & Gamble & Walnut Hills High School

1995

151 - Lockheed Sanders & Nashua High School

1994

191 - Xerox Corporation & JC Wilson Magnet High School

1993

7 - AT&T Bell Labs & Science High School

1992

191 - Xerox Corporation & JC Wilson Magnet High School

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For Cash-Strapped Teams, Community Support Makes the Difference

At a small-town parade in Virginia coal country, Christmas came early last year for the FIRST Robotics team from Grundy High School.



"Our team was in the local Christmas parade with the two robots we built in previous years, and one of our students ran up shouting, 'We got the grant, we got the grant!'" said Amanda Blankenship, a chemistry teacher and captain of the "Maximum Oz" robotics team #388 in Grundy, Virginia. "That made all the difference. That meant we could go to the competition."



Top: Grundy High School's team #388 "Maximum Oz" receives a donation from Dan Adams of American Electric Power.

Bottom: Grundy's 2000 FIRST Robotics team with their Rookie All-Star robot named "wavebot."

The grant, from NASA, will pay the team's registration fees to enter the FIRST Robotics Competition, plus \$1000 in travel expenses.

Though rich in natural beauty, Grundy is a coal town fallen on hard times. For Grundy and other cash-strapped communities, local support and the sponsorship of corporations and organizations like NASA are the only things that make participation in the robotics competition possible.

"It's a financial issue, that's it in a nutshell," Blankenship said. "It's hard here, but this year we pulled it out."

Making a difference

For the students of Grundy, getting into the competition means an opportunity to shine. In Grundy's rookie year in the robotics competition, the team went to the championship competition in 2000, winning the Rookie All-Star Award as well as the Featherweight Award for lightest robot. The team returned to competition in 2001, but in 2002 could not come up with sponsorships to pay FIRST's registration fees. The Grundy team instead had to sit out the season.

"FIRST is such a great program, and I just couldn't let it die there," said Blankenship. "This is the opportunity of a lifetime for these kids. We're closed off from the world by these mountains, and the kids aren't exposed to a lot of things, a lot of job opportunities. This makes a real difference in their lives."

Consider David Roark's experience. A member of Grundy's 2001 robotics team, Roark hadn't given much thought to a future career, or any career at all. "I don't know, I thought maybe I would be a paramedic, but I hadn't thought about it much," Roark recalled. "But FIRST really brought it all into perspective, and I found out that I really

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liked engineering. It made my decision.

"I'm going to be a civil engineer," said Roark, now an engineering major at Southwest Virginia Community College.

Local support

In Grundy, local companies and organizations have shown their support of the program in numerous ways. American Electric Power donates financial support. Pal's Electric Shop, a welding shop for heavy mining equipment in nearby Home Creek, donates workshop space. Terra Tech, a local mining- and civil-engineering firm, lends office space, Auto-CAD equipment and engineering know-how. The local movie theater plays the team's video as a trailer before movies.

But with competition requiring \$10,000 to \$20,000, fund-raising remains the key challenge. The team has held a yard sale at the local bank and a bake sale at the homecoming parade. They've auctioned themselves off as "work horses for a day" to the highest bidder, and to raise additional cash, they even plan to tape a teacher to the wall. "During the wrestling pep rally, we'll sell strips of tape to students to tape one of our volunteer faculty members to the gym wall," Blankenship said.

Kids raising money to participate in a science competition: It's a remarkable effort and one that is repeated over and over again around the country.

In Richmond, Virginia, for example, the robotics team at Richmond Community High School has built a network of community sponsors, including a class of engineering students that has "adopted" the team. Elsewhere, in Philadelphia, Mississippi, a team of Native American students from Choctaw Central High School has canvassed the community with presentations to get the support of a machine shop and local businesses.

"We have a lot of teams that have to beg and borrow to get into the competition," said Pattie Cook, a FIRST regional director in Richmond. "Even though some of these teams may not be the best equipped or wealthiest or have the best uniforms, they have a real chance. There's a lot of talent out there, and these teams just need a chance to get in the door."

Corporate sponsors needed

"My dream is to find a big corporate sponsor for this program so that we can keep on doing it," Blankenship said.

A host of Fortune 500 companies and government agencies donate considerable resources to help FIRST teams. As a key partner, NASA donates some \$3 million a year to robotics education, two-thirds of which goes to FIRST to help support more than 200 robotics teams.

"At a purely pragmatic level, this is an opportunity to develop our future pool of employees," said Dave Lavery, NASA program executive for solar system exploration and the man who led the effort to land robots on Mars. "We're definitely looking at the possibility of some of these kids going through FIRST and getting inspired to come to work for us.

"When Amanda [Blankenship] is trying to gain corporate support in Grundy, Virginia, the companies have to make that sort of connection," Lavery added. "For companies in financial straits, there's got to be a strong financial case that there will be a corporate return on

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View the list of 2007 Competition events [here](#).

investment. That connection is real, and I absolutely believe that there is a real financial return on making a long-term investment in these kids."

In Grundy, Virginia, that investment is already paying off for Terra Tech. As a result of the company's support of the local robotics team, they've already tapped into the next generation of engineers: David Roark, the budding engineer, works as a lab technician at Terra Tech while he pursues his education.

"Isn't that what it's all about?" asked Blankenship. "These kids are our future."

Support a team

Companies interested in sponsoring a team may use FIRST's online interactive map to locate local teams. If there isn't yet a local team, FIRST recommends contacting a local high school principal or math and science teacher to raise their interest in forming a team. FIRST can also help sponsors connect with regional directors who work with the teams.

[Use the interactive map of FIRST teams and competitions to find a team near you.](#)

[Make a donation to FIRST using the PayPal online payment system](#)

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Doing Well by Doing Good: Companies Realize Returns from Their Generosity

Dave Lavery arguably has one of the coolest jobs on the planet -- and maybe beyond. As the program manager for NASA's telerobotics program, Lavery leads projects that put robots on Mars and lay the groundwork for other space exploration missions. Through his involvement with FIRST, Lavery believes he's also building the foundation for NASA's future.

Lavery was introduced to FIRST when neighborhood students asked him to help them form a FIRST Robotics Competition team. At a time when Lavery was nursing concerns that a waning talent pool could weaken NASA's future robotics projects, the program presented an ideal way to spark excitement about robotics in a new generation. Nearly a decade later, NASA now gives \$3 million a year to its [Robotics Education Project](#), including \$2 million to FIRST and the sponsorship of over 200 teams.

"At the most pragmatic business level, it just makes sense for NASA to invest in FIRST," Lavery said. "We believe that we're creating the future talent pool of employees in the robotics field, but it's more than that. We originally got involved with FIRST to get students motivated and excited about robotics, but it turned out to be one of the best in-house training projects we've got for project management."

At the Johnson Space Center, for example, one of the first jobs given to new arrivals is to lead a FIRST Robotics team, going through an entire engineering product cycle in just six weeks while managing a mix of high school students, NASA engineering mentors and parent and teacher volunteers.

"If you can bring that community together and get from a blank sheet of paper to getting a finished product out the door on time in six weeks, you'll know how to manage any project that comes your way," Lavery said, adding that every project manager in his NASA robotics research group started as a FIRST team captain.

Doing well by doing good

NASA is hardly alone. Companies and agencies around the world donate thousands of people hours and hundreds of tons of hardware to make the FIRST Robotics Competition possible. These companies have a shared belief in the FIRST mission and its values of teamwork and gracious professionalism. But they also share a certainty that as organizations, they can do well by doing good.

"It's so important for the future of our company -- and for that matter for our country -- that programs like FIRST are supported by industry," said Craig Muhlhauser, chairman and CEO of [Exide Technologies](#), the world's largest producer and recycler of lead acid batteries. Exide donates some 6000 batteries and chargers to FIRST teams, and also sponsors team #469 "Las Guerrillas" of West Bloomfield, Michigan.

"It might seem mundane, but a battery is an engineered product," Muhlhauser said. "A large part of Exide's future is going to be built on attracting and interesting young people in engineering and in being part of a global company. We believe that if we come in contact with these future engineers at an important time in their lives, then perhaps we

About the FIRST Robotics Competition

From 28 teams in 1992 to over 1,125 today, the FIRST Robotics Competition has a long [history of success](#).

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Interested in a program for 9 to 14-year-olds? [Now is your chance!](#)

Get Started with FIRST Robotics

Interested in a program that involves high school students? [Get started today!](#)

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can spark a lasting professional interest.

"Jobs are created through innovation," Muhlhauser added, "and the best way to ensure continued innovation is by creating the kind of creative environment like you find at FIRST."

Exide is starting a school-to-work co-op program to help students connect their excitement about FIRST with a professional career path. Other firms, including NASA, have similarly discovered that FIRST has a real impact on students' career decisions, delivering a material benefit to corporate sponsorship.

"FIRST shows students career paths that they might never have considered before, opening up futures that they never thought of. On an individual, personal level, that means that FIRST is having a real impact on these students' lives, helping them realize what they're capable of," Lavery said. "On a national level, we're creating new engineers who will drive the entire future economic engine of the country."

Become a FIRST sponsor or supplier

Is your company interested in donating expertise, resources or materials to FIRST? [Contact us for more information.](#)