



Best Practices for Growing City or County-level Science Fair Participation

Science Buddies has worked directly with the Monterey County, CA, and Sacramento County, CA science and engineering fairs to increase participation, and we have observed many others. The tips below contain techniques that have been very effective. Growth will depend on the existing participation rates at your fair, but in both the fairs we worked with, first-year growth exceeded 20%, driven primarily by personally addressed notifications of the fair to all science teachers in the region.

Keep in mind that growth occurs a few teachers or schools at a time, but cumulated over several years, such growth can be quite substantial.

Issue	Best Practice
Scheduling the Fair	Effective scheduling is key to a fair's attendance.
Avoid school vacation periods	Virtually no one will participate in a science fair scheduled during a school vacation period. Call ALL the school districts in your territory (public and private) to find a common, available date (this takes a few hours, if that). Finding a date clear of vacations can be a challenge with winter and spring breaks being held at widely varying times, but it's worth the effort. If you have to compromise, don't schedule during the vacation of a school with past participants, or one that is a likely source of attendance growth.
Avoid potential conflicting events	Some things to watch for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - SAT test days (important for high school students, and all that you might need to do is insure that a judging interview step doesn't conflict with these Saturday morning tests). - Junior Science & Humanities Forum
Take into account deadlines for higher level fairs	Higher-level fairs, such as the state science fair and the Intel International Science & Engineering Fair (ISEF), have cutoff dates for students to qualify. If you are affiliated with these fairs, or your students are eligible, be sure to schedule your fair before the qualification dates.
Confirm the venue	Secure the venue early and in writing. We're aware of a fair

	that once announced a venue, and months later discovered it was actually unavailable, forcing them to change the announced fair date AND the venue.
Notify teachers early, before their lesson plans are set in stone	If at all possible, establish the date in August, but no later than early September, and let teachers know the key dates for science fair participation in a timely fashion.
Send reminders	Send reminders before key events, such as registration. If you send the original mailing by snail mail, and you have email addresses, then reminders can be sent email (unless you know that teachers in your region do not regularly use email).
Awareness	It's not uncommon for 40-50% of the science teachers to be unaware that a county science fair even exists! Taking simple steps to create awareness can dramatically improve attendance over the course of a year or two.
Update a science teacher database every year	<p>In some California counties, turnover of science teachers exceeds 20% per year, so it's vitally important to keep and update a teacher database.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some schools might have some or all of the information you need on their website. Check, and if it's there, verify that it's current. - Call each school, identify yourself, and ask for the names of all the science teachers. Since you're not asking for personal information, most schools will provide this information, although it might take some persistence to get to the person with the information. The second time you do it takes even less time, as you can work from your database printout and you'll only need to strike teachers that have left and fill in names of those who are new. - Try to get email addresses for the teachers, as this will simplify any reminders that you send. Sometimes, you can get or figure out the "standard form" of the email address from the school website. Then, knowing the teacher names you can accurately guess the email addresses. - Verify the school mailing address.
Mail directly to all science teachers, by name	<i>Mail individual copies of each mailing to every science teacher in your region, with the envelope addressed by name (the letter can be generic). We have learned that this is the single most important step to increasing awareness for your science fair.</i>

	<p>DO NOT MAIL to "Science Department Chairperson." This is a sure way for your information to either end up in the trash or arrive at a key teacher too late for him or her to act on it.</p>
<p>Contents of the mailing</p>	<p>Some key items to think about including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Format at least one page of your mailing so that it can be posted or duplicated and passed out to students. - Tell students what is in it for them. - Include key dates (registration deadline, project check-in, judging, etc.) in every mailing; don't assume people have your last one. - Include information on a teacher workshop(s) if you plan to hold one. - Consider including a reply card, which can ask opinions about the fair and request an email address for future communications. - Provide basic information about science fairs for teachers who may be new to the process. This is as easy as including a sheet that directs them to the Science Buddies Teacher Resources section at: http://www.sciencebuddies.org/science-fair-projects/teacher_resources.shtml (http://www.sciencebuddies.org/science-fair-projects/teacher_resources.shtml) <p>We have everything a teacher needs to manage science fair projects in his or her classroom.</p>
<p>Teacher workshop(s)</p>	<p>A teacher workshop can be a great way to answer teacher questions, especially those of teachers who are new to science fairs. The Sacramento Science & Engineering Fair found that a teacher workshop helped boost participation from new schools.</p> <p>The information in the Science Buddies Teacher Resources (at http://www.sciencebuddies.org/science-fair-projects/teacher_resources.shtml (http://www.sciencebuddies.org/science-fair-projects/teacher_resources.shtml)) can be used as part or all of the presentation, making it reasonably easy to pull together.</p>
<p>Newspaper and TV coverage</p>	<p>Getting newspaper and TV coverage of a county level science fair can be a difficult challenge. Sometimes a newspaper will cover the winners (if you are lucky), but won't write an article letting people know about the fair in the first place. Here are some ideas:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Don't overlook community calendar sections where almost everything will be listed, even if it only amounts to a sentence or two. - Try to get a local newspaper or TV station to be one of your sponsors. This gets them personally invested in the fair. - Take advantage of students who win at higher-level fairs to get press for your own. Winning at the state level is generally seen as more newsworthy. Put out a press release that describes what happened at your own fair that enabled your students to win at a higher level. If you are fortunate enough to have a student win in the Siemens Competition and/or Intel Science Talent Search, milk it for all it is worth. The Monterey County Science & Engineering Fair had participation jump by greater than 20% the year after a student was an Intel STS Finalist.
Hassle Factor	
Do whatever you can to minimize the distance and number of times parents must drive to the fair	Avoid scheduling during the workday as much as possible. Try to limit such trips to one, if any at all.
Make it easy for teachers	<p>Point them to the Science Buddies Teacher Resources section for help managing science projects in their classroom:</p> <p>http://www.sciencebuddies.org/science-fair-projects/teacher_resources.shtml (http://www.sciencebuddies.org/science-fair-projects/teacher_resources.shtml)</p> <p>We have everything a teacher needs to manage science fair projects in his or her classroom.</p>
Eligibility & Applications	
Let everyone join	Don't require prequalification or teacher approvals—allow all students to enter (public school, private school, home school) unless you have a severe space problem. It's highly unlikely that you will be overrun!
Teacher information	Student registration is another opportunity to obtain information on teachers that can be added to your database. You'll know specifically which teachers support the fair, and

	you may be able to obtain their email addresses as part of the registration process.
Schools that Don't Participate	Frustrating for every fair are those schools that hold their own fair, but hold it too late for students to enter the county science fair and/or don't encourage students to attend the higher-level fairs. We don't have any magic bullets for this one, and ask anyone who has found a solution to let us know.

You can find this page online at: <http://www.sciencebuddies.org/science-fair-projects/teachers-guide-best-practices.shtml>

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