



**Why *not* in
a corporate
conference
room?**

**These kids
mean business**

*Middle-school math wizards hone their skills
at Seagate during Boulder County Mathcounts
regional competition*

On a Friday morning last month, in the Spruce room here at Seagate, the tension was high, as more than 60 students tackled complex math problems posed by officials of the Boulder County Mathcounts competition. Just rooms away from where engineers were designing computer disc drives, these students were using some of the same kinds of skills.

“That’s why we invited the students here,” said Seagate senior software engineer Paul Anderson. “Besides wanting to give them a comfortable place to concentrate while they compete, we wanted them to come and be a part of an environment that might someday be their workplace.” Anderson, a member of the Boulder Chapter of the Professional Engineers of Colorado (PEC), came up with the idea to host the competition at Seagate after talking to a Mathcounts rep at a recent PEC meeting.



And he was there to greet the kids on this February morning, as they filed into the building along with employees. It was 7:45 when the students began to arrive. And they were surprisingly chipper, considering the early-morning

hour. But as Seagate observers in the Spruce room soon discovered, the students' hyper-vigilance was at least partly sugar-induced. Almost as important as their calculators were the mounds of candy placed strategically in the center of the table for group access. It was the chewy kind that you can eat fast, so the sugar goes right to your bloodstream.



Not that everyone uses that technique to get going. Some kids do physical exercise. Others play chess. But for many, including Joshua

Martin, a 6-grader at Summit Middle School in Longmont, candy consumption is a regular part of the pre-competition warm-up process. Before the contest begins, said Martin “we practice Mathcounts-type problems and eat sugar.”

Couple that with an out-of-the-ordinary aptitude for math and you've got a room full of high-speed, human computers. Said Lew Sowell, a member of the Mathcounts sponsor National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE): “They're so quick. Some of them know the answer to the question before the announcer is finished asking it.”



Wade Payne, a math teacher at Louisville Middle School, has been coaching Mathcounts students for 18 years. He's seen a lot of them come and go. By the time they get to college, he said, they're more than ready. “Some become math teachers. Most go on to become engineers in a technical field. I can't think of any who have not gone on to college to get an advanced degree.”

Mathcounts' success in priming students for technical careers may also have something to do with the kinds of organizations that sponsor the program. NSPE—with local chapters across the country, including the Boulder-based PEC—is a co-founder of Mathcounts, along with the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and CNA Foundation.





The three groups started Mathcounts in 1983, recognizing a need to cultivate stronger problem-solving skills in middle school students. More than five million students have participated in

the program, which operates in all 50 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, and worldwide schools run by the U.S. Department of Defense and State Department.

The Mathcounts competition includes four rounds: “Sprint,”



“Target,” “Team,” and “Countdown.” The first three rounds are done on paper. And students must solve the written math problems within a certain amount of time. The top 10 winners of those three rounds go on to compete in the Countdown round. This session, the pinnacle of the event, is done orally, in front of all participants and coaches—with all the drama of a high-stakes TV game show. The top teams and individuals from this regional event advance to the statewide competition held at the University of Denver in March.

State winners go on to compete in the national event, held in Washington D.C. in May.

“The problem-solving skills that these students possess are incredible,” said Tara Meyer, Boulder Chapter Mathcounts Coordinator. “These are the kind of students that I want as colleagues 10 years from now.”

And Seagate wants them as employees, said senior vice president Charlie Sander. “We were pleased to be able to support this effort here at our facility. And we hope the students who visited us will think very seriously about coming back someday to work here. By participating in Mathcounts, these students have already demonstrated their commitment to enhancing their analytical skills. And those are the kind of people we look for here at Seagate.”



Ed. Note: *For information about becoming a Mathcounts coach, visit <http://mathcounts.org>*

