

Team will represent Oregon at U.S. finals

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Statesman Journal

January 23, 2010

Lincoln High School in Portland won the right Friday to represent Oregon at the national finals in a competition designed to test the students' understanding of the history and relevance of the U.S. Constitution.

But the executive director of the contest-sponsoring group said the real winners are all the students who participated.

"I hope some of you become teachers, and some of you will run for political office," Marilyn Cover said before announcing the winners in the state finals at the Capitol. "But all of you are going to vote — and you are going to be informed voters. You are not going to be suckered by 30-second advertisements, and you will do more than read the voters pamphlet."

Cover leads the Classroom Law Project, a nonprofit organization that promotes civics education.

Lincoln, which won for the first time in seven years, moves on to the national finals April 24-26 in Washington, D.C.

"It's nice that we can finally see all our efforts pay off in something like this," said Lane Barton, a sophomore on the team.

Tim Swinehart, a Lincoln social studies teacher, said three more months of preparation await his 35-member team.

"But Oregon has one of the most competitive state competitions in the country," he said while clutching the first-place silver bowl. "So we have faced some of our toughest competition already."

Oregon has had state competitions since 1987. Helped by teachers and volunteer coaches, many of whom are lawyers, the students read about the framers of the Constitution, Supreme Court cases interpreting the document, and why the Constitution matters in controversies arising today.

"What all our kids have learned — and what they are going to take with them into the rest of their lives — will be the best reward they can get," Swinehart said.

Lincoln emerged from six regional winners — the others were Franklin and Grant in Portland, plus Junction City, Lake Oswego and Pendleton — during a day-long competition in which the student participants never saw each other face to face, except during breaks and at the closing ceremony.

Students on each high school team made a presentation on one of six preselected topics to three-member judging panels, consisting of actual judges and lawyers, legislators, teachers and others. The panels then asked questions and offered their comments. The students faced six 20-minute sessions in the morning and six 20-minute sessions in the afternoon, so every topic was covered twice.

"You know your stuff," said state Rep. Scott Bruun, R-West Linn, one of the contest judges. "But it appears you're also having fun."

Among the topics were the factors that motivated American colonists to break with Great Britain in 1776, the debate between Federalists and Anti-Federalists over creating the Constitution in 1787, the significance of religious freedom, the importance of congressional deliberations, the role of the Supreme Court — and the meaning of the court's Dred Scott decision in 1857.

The latter is regarded as the court's worst decision — that blacks were slaves, not citizens, and were property protected by the Constitution. It added to the tensions that led to the Civil War, the nation's bloodiest conflict, and the 13th Amendment that became part of the Constitution several months after the 1865 assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, who came to champion the abolition of slavery.

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