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### For student competitors, it's all about 'bots

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The students are introduced to engineering concepts as they build and test Lego robots.

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BRISTOL - One day, robots might make everyone's life easier.

But we're not there yet, as elementary and middle school students learned Saturday.

At the state's fourth-annual First Lego **League** Robotics Competition, they tested the performance of the Lego robots that they had been designing for the last four months.

Held at Roger Williams University, in Bristol, the event featured 43 teams -- representing 33 schools and including squads of home-schooled students -- maneuvering robots through an obstacle course, as they picked up objects and stopped at points along the way.

The challenge, students said, introduced them to the world of engineering and robotics.

"Coming out and competing in this is such a great opportunity for the kids," said coach Susan Kirkstone, who also teaches third grade at the Captain Isaac Paine Elementary School, in Foster. "I wish my own children had this in school."

Kirkstone said that she and her fellow coach, Rebecca Payette, began working with elementary students last fall,

meeting after classes and dividing the project into sections, such as design and programming.

"One of the biggest components of being successful is being able to use teamwork to troubleshoot problems with your design," Payette said. "Learning how to go back over your project and make changes makes a big difference."

Foster students Samantha Goodwin, 13, and her sisters Julia and Lydia, 12 and 10, leaned over the team's laptop computer discussing how best to get their robot to make the turns. They worked at breakneck pace, discussing the best way of commanding the robot.

"They build a lot of confidence doing this," Kirkstone said, watching the girls. "When they started some of them were too scared to even touch the robot."

Matt Stein, professor of robotics at Roger Williams University and a coach for one of the teams, the Warwick Robotics Club, said: "It can be hard for students to understand all the real physical variables in the world.

"Robots attempt to work with real world variables that are most of the time really uncertain. It's trying to control what the real world throws at them."

Stein said that it might seem easy to command a robot to rotate, but contours of the surface and obstacles can present all kinds of challenges.

"These are problems that my undergraduate students have trouble with," Stein said.

Shane and Kyle Inman, homeschoolers from Chepachet who are on the Warwick Robotics Club team, said they like the challenge.

"I always like building things with Lego, and when I saw the robotics class I decided to join," Kyle12, said. "The best part was coming up with new ideas on how to put the robot together."

Shane, 10, said the activity has made him more interested in engineering.

"It was kind of hard to program the robot so it would work the way you wanted it to work. But I'd like to do it again," he said. "I haven't done much programming before."

That's precisely the point, according to Stein. "I don't think many of these kids will end up in robotics," he said. "But getting them interested in engineering and problem solving at an early age is definitely a positive."

Toymaker Lego provided the materials for the event, which Roger Williams University's Engineering School cosponsored with a number of corporate underwriters.

The winning team, middle-school students at the Gordon School, in East Providence, was awarded \$1,000 -- the entry fee for the global robotics competition, to be held in Atlanta in April.

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\* \* \*

Elizabeth Redin and Ryan Russell, sixth graders at Deering Middle School in West Warwick -- whose team is dubbed the Mega Moutn Sharks -- prepare their entry for action in Saturday's statewide First Lego **League** Robotics Competition, held at Roger Williams University, in Bristol.

JOURNAL PHOTO / GLENN OSMUNDSON

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