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Robots are just their cup of tea

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A large number of the middle-school students at the annual Lego robotics tournament are girls.

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EAST PROVIDENCE - Pop quiz: more and more 12- and 13-year-old girls in Rhode Island are starting to like what?

A: Makeup

B: Boys

C: Building, programming and controlling robots.

The answer is C. Pre-teen and teenage girls from across the state flocked in droves to yesterday's second annual First Lego **League** Rhode Island State Robotics Tournament.

Held at East Providence High School, 35 student teams spent the day trying to convince a set of 18 judges that they had the best-programmed, best-designed and best-performing robot in the state. And a large number of the 200 to 300 mostly middle school students jumping into the trenches yesterday were girls.

"It's been wicked fun," said Emily McNeil, an eighth grader at Riverside Middle School, while taking a pizza break in the cafeteria as her team prepared to send its robot out on its final mission of the day.

Each team in yesterday's tournament had to build a robot out of brightly colored Lego blocks and program its tiny computer-chip brain to perform a series of maneuvers in less than three minutes. None of the teams could use a remote control. All of the twisting, lifting, turning and pushing had to be pre-programmed into the machine.

It wasn't easy. Robots toppled. Lego pieces went flying. Gasps and sighs ripped through the crowd as one robot after another strayed off target.

But one of the most intriguing events of the day wasn't the robot race it was the demographics of the participants. An influx of girls into an activity revolving around computer programming is a sea change. In the late 1990s, the Department of Commerce's Office of Technology Policy reported that women earned just one-quarter of bachelor degrees in computer and information science awarded in the U.S. annually.

Plus, the number of women earning computer-science degrees dropped dramatically between 1984 and 1994, due in part to a lack of interest among girls and young women, according to the report.

But locally, more and more girls are starting to see things the way Rachel Milito does. Milito, a seventh grader at Park View Middle School in Cranston, eagerly planned out a computer-programming strategy yesterday and has her heart set on attending the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"A lot of the stuff that I'm doing at school is easy, so I like things that make me think," said Milito.

It's a change due, in part, to teachers such as Al Hurst, the technology-education teacher at Park View Middle School in Cranston. Noticing that boys often took over the computer-programming roles in robotics projects, Hurst last year applied to the state for a grant to set up a robotics program at his school just for girls.

"For years boys have had the opportunity to do robotics, the girls would get pushed aside and didn't get to do the programming," said Hurst.

Response from the girls in Cranston has been overwhelming, he said. Last school year, 20 signed up to be part of the robotics tournament. This year, more than 50 girls put their names on Hurst's list.

"It's one of those programs where I'm getting to the point where you have to say no," said Hurst.

This was the second year for the robotics tournament in Rhode Island. Sponsored by the First Lego **League**, this regional tournament is part of a nationwide competition. Each year, the competition, geared toward raising students' interest in technology, science and math, focuses on a different theme. This year, it was urban planning.

The approximately 26,000 students from across the United States who participated in this year's challenge, all between the ages of 9 and 14, created robots that could perform city maintenance, such as moving tiny barrels of toxic waste. The teams, made up of 5 to 10 students, also had to pull together a research paper on how robots could be used to solve a specific urban problem, such as pollution.

"In my mind, this is a tremendous way to get kids to think about ways to solve problems," said Paul Williams, a career and technical education specialist at the Rhode Island Department of Education and one of about 18 volunteer judges weighing in yesterday on the state tournament. "And it removes the mystery of technology from women."

Winners were selected in a number of categories, from team spirit to research quality. The overall winner of the tournament was the Warehouse Workers, a team from Our Lady of Mercy in East Greenwich a team with a woman coach.

* * *

ON YOUR MARK: Hannah Fischbach, left, and Rachel Milito, both of Cranston, ready their Lego machine.

JOURNAL PHOTO / GLENN OSMUNDSON

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BREATHE. . . : Andrea Wilmot, left, and Meagan McKenna, of Park View Middle School in Cranston, watch their teammates compete against Thompson Middle School in Newport.

JOURNAL PHOTO / GLENN OSMUNDSON

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