Scheck Hillel places first in Technion contest

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About 260 students and faculty of Scheck Hillel Community School scurried to the athletic center Monday morning to celebrate the results of the national Technion Jewish Day School Challenge.

The Northeast Miami-Dade team tied at first place in the middle school category with Bialik College in Australia, winning a 3D printer for Scheck. "This was our first time competing," middle school director Joshua Meisels said. "We set the bar pretty high."

Sixth-grade students Malvina DiMitri, Zachary Lenner, Sadie Slomovitz and Hannah Stern worked tirelessly for three months to build a Passover-themed Rube Goldberg Machine, a purposely over-engineered contraption created to do a simple task.

In this case, the task was to reveal a Seder plate. The team's machine incorporated the 10 Biblical plagues of Egypt to transfer energy and reveal the plate.

"We brainstormed the supplies we would need, started adding things, using multiple reasoning and changing our machine until we got it where we wanted," said Sadie, 12. "It took flexibility."

Some of the supplies used were a balloon to represent the death of the firstborn, a tank of water to turn water into blood, a mannequin's head and pipe to represent boils, three fake frogs, plastic toy animals to represent diseased livestock and a Kiddush cup.

"At the beginning, the Kiddush cup got knocked over and fell into a tank of water," said Zachary, 12. "Then it pulled up a lever and Aaron's staff came up."

In the end, the Kiddush cup that started the chain reaction was the same one to finish it.

"It was the whole world, and we are a small school compared to the whole world," said Malvina, 11.

While the contest had no limit to the number of students per team, the middle school only used four because that is what they had.

"I knew which students from my design class would be best at this," said Charlie Mahoney, one of the team's coaches. "We filmed in the athletic center and were able to conduct our machine there."

With the help of their other coach, Athena Hadjixenofontos, students used brainstorm methods such as word webs and SCAMPER: substitute, combine, adapt, modify, put to another use, eliminate and reverse, Mahoney said.

"Students learned about revision, Newton's laws, transfer of energy and creativity," he said.

After competing for the first time, the four-student team is looking forward to taking on the Technion challenge next year as seventh-graders.

"This competition was an extension of what we do each and every day," Meisels said. "Only this time, it was on an international level."