

Local student wins U.S. Geography Olympiad championship

Buchholz High School freshman Albert Zhang remembers telling his kindergarten teacher that geography was his favorite subject—a choice he acknowledges most people would probably find, in his words, ‘weird.’ Ten years later, Zhang still has a passion for it.

“I love how visual it is, because I’m kind of a visual learner,” he said. “I like to imagine where things are in relation to each other and also imagine myself in other places.”

That passion has led Zhang to spend much of his time studying geography, despite a rigorous schedule that includes advanced coursework and lots of extracurricular activities. He’s now been recognized as one of the best geography students in the nation.

recently won the United States Geography Olympiad’s Junior Varsity Championship, making him the nation’s top geography student among those 15 years old and younger. He won the championship by a large margin, and his scores were actually high enough to earn him a spot on the U.S. team for the upcoming International Geography Olympiad. Unfortunately he’s just a few weeks shy of the age requirement, but his impressive performance this year makes him a heavy favorite to make the national team next year.

To earn the right to compete at the national level, Zhang had to make a high score on a regional qualifying exam. The national competition involved a multiple choice test, an essay test and a map skills exam. Zhang beat out his competition in all three categories to take the championship.

Being a top geography competitor means much more than memorizing places on a map. Especially at the higher levels of competition, students are expected to analyze data and apply their knowledge of geography, science, social studies and other subjects to real world issues, like environmental sustainability, the spread of disease or foreign affairs. He gives the example of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2014.

“When Americans were asked to locate Ukraine, most of them put it much closer to America than it really is, and that affected their view of what our leaders should do about the invasion,” he said.

Zhang will continue to study geography in hopes of making it onto next year’s national team, which would be competing for the international championship in Hong Kong. At that level, competitors actually go out into the host city to conduct research on critical issues.

Zhang says an understanding of how geography relates to such issues is crucial for the nation’s leaders and for the people who vote them into office.

“Every citizen of the U.S. and other democratic countries have a duty to pay attention to things like that,” he said. “If you don’t understand how the world works, how can you make good decisions about who to elect?”



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