

Dakota High School Sending Team to Model UN Confab



More than 30 schools and 1,000 students will participate in Michigan's 20th anniversary gathering of the internationally recognized program.

The Macomb Patch

By Beth Dalbey (Patch Staff) October 26, 2015

The Royal Oak High School Model United Nations team, made up of members of the high school's international debate team, will host Michigan's largest Model United Nations conference next month.

More than 30 high schools and 1,000 students are expected to participate in the event, to be held from 9:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 7, at Royal Oak High School.

Participating schools include Berkley High School, Bloomfield Hills High School, Brighton High School, Dakota High School (Macomb Township), Detroit Country Day School, Dearborn High School, Edsel Ford High School, Farmington High School, North Farmington High School and Harrison High School (Farmington Hills).

Also, International Academy (Bloomfield Hills), International Academy Macomb (Clinton Township), International Academy West (White Lake), Northville High School, Novi High School, Plymouth-Canton High School, Saline High School, Seaholm High School (Birmingham), Troy High School, Troy Athens High School, West Bloomfield High School.

The internationally recognized competition has been going for 20 years under the SouthEast Michigan Model United Nations Association (SEMMUNA) conference, co-founded by Royal Oak High School teacher Steve Chisnell and Sue Zimmerman, a former adviser to Dearborn's Model United Nations team.

Just 80 students were involved two decades ago, but now more than 1,000 are involved. The competition is hosted by a different high school each fall.

"We've grown new programs around Michigan, we've helped foster a positive spirit of debate here, and we've inspired thousands of students to help solve the tough issues in the world," Chisnell said. "The Association now offers scholarships to seniors, mentors new schools, and has branched out from its original mission, soon to form a League of Model UN programs and conferences throughout Michigan.

That league is the plan of SEMMUNA's new director, Matt MacLeod of Bloomfield Hills High School Model UN. MacLeod has successfully connected every Model United Nations program in Michigan as an active partner in SEMMUNA's goals. University and professional programs from Michigan State University, the University of Michigan, Oakland University and Eastern Michigan University, for example, will participate in the Nov. 7 event. The SEMMUNA conference is fairly unique among Model UN conferences, consciously moving away from competitive challenges and focusing more on the educational experience of international diplomacy.

Thirty-six different debates on topics ranging from human rights for women in Saudi Arabia to the Iranian nuclear deal will be discussed among United Nations member states, each represented by a student from a different school. The real UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, has encouraged Model UN conferences to focus on collaboration and consensus-building and to move away from a system which encourages competition.

The SEMMUNA conference has always been a training conference, Chisnell said, "and we want every student to learn how policies are made, how countries reason, and where breakdowns in negotiations are often repairable."

The Nov. 7 conference is unique because of several other features.

First, it will operate an active press corps of students who will write and video stories from the conference, supported by ROHS teachers Ann Maudlin and Michael Conrad. Debaters can also set up their own "press conferences" to speak publicly about the situation they are in and field questions from reporters.

Social studies teacher Alec Snyder will coordinate a Crisis Team which will spring fictional emergency situations from around the world onto committees to complicate their debate.

And all of this will be coordinated and distributed through a planned Twitter network of hashtags that student delegates can access during the conference.

"It's an experiment," Chisnell said, "but we're silly to believe that the social media tools at our disposal are unimportant when we're in educational settings, or in global political ones. It's likely to be unpredictable."

» *Photo via SouthEast Michigan Model United Nations Association*