

ATLANTIC SCIENCE LINKS ASSOCIATION (ASLA)



ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

2025/2026

Fourth Conference for Science Teachers: A Day of Discovery

Enthusiastic science teachers from seven Regional Centres for Education and private schools across Nova Scotia attended the highly anticipated fourth Conference for Science Teachers by the Atlantic Science Links Association (ASLA), braving the rain on Saturday in the third week of November 2025. *(read more on page 2)*

Science Contest Draws Nearly 1,300 Junior High Students

In December 2023, nearly 1300 junior high students from 20 schools and seven Regional Centres for Education (RCE) participated in ASLA's second science contest, promoting STEM career exploration. The top ten scorers and the top scorers from each RCE and independent school were awarded certificates, and the top three finishers from grades 7, 8, and 9 also received cash awards. After the winners were announced in the award ceremony, ASLA hosted a reception at Dalhousie University. *(read more on page 3)*

Women in STEM Mentorship Network Launched with First Event

In February 2025, ASLA established the Nova Scotia Women in STEM Mentorship Network (WSMN), aimed at encouraging young women to participate in STEM activities and education through representation and mentorship. The WSMN was introduced to the public in April 2025 with a pilot event, a virtual Q&A seminar for self-identified girls in grades 10-12 and their parents. *(read more on page 4)*

OUR SERVICES AND RESOURCES

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2025 ASLA Conference for Science Teachers

ASLA Conference for Science Teachers (continued from page 1)

The full-day conference invited science teachers from across Nova Scotia to Dalhousie University, where they participated in curriculum-related, hands-on labs, facilitated by Dalhousie scientists. The goal of the conference was to transfer practical, classroom-ready science content and techniques directly to teachers, strengthening science education at the grassroots level. All aspects of the event were free of charge for teachers.

The day began with a land acknowledgement and opening remarks from ASLA President, Arunika Gunawardena, and a welcome speech given by Charles Macdonald, Dean of the Faculty of Science, Dalhousie University. Teachers were then split into groups and ferried to their labs. The labs consisted of:

- Understanding and identifying mineral and crystal properties (Instructor: Dr. James Brennan with PhD student Peteris Rozenbaks)
- Meet your neighbours: Plants in and around the schoolyard (Instructor: Prof. Lara Gibson)
- Exploring DNA from fruit (Instructors: postdoc James Kho and PhD student Tiara Mulder)
- Ocean School: Exploring the ocean through immersive multimedia (Instructor: Dr. Boris Worm)

Halifax Sci-Tech Expo Chief Judge Julia Sarty also provided a lunchtime information session on “Making Science Fairs Work for You”.

Twenty-two teachers were in attendance. Labs were relevant to junior high curriculum, but offered modifications to suit all grade levels. Teachers came from far and wide across Nova Scotia, including rural, remote schools and inner-city schools, and public and private schools. 7 teachers came from Halifax Regional Centre for Education (HRCE), 3 from Chignecto Central Regional Centre for Education (CCRCE), 3 from Conseil Scolaire Acadien Provincial (CSAP), 2 from Annapolis Valley Regional Centre for Education (AVRCE), 2 from Tri-County Regional Centre for Education (TCRCE), 1 from Strait Regional Centre for Education (SRCE), 1 from Cape Breton-Victoria Regional Centre for Education (CBVRCE), and 2 from Private/Independent schools.

The conference ended with closing remarks from Patrice Côté, Chair of the Department of Biology, Dalhousie University, and from ASLA’s Executive Director Rajesh Rajeselvam, a final vote of thanks to the teachers who attended, lab hosts, volunteers, board members, funders, and conference organizers Arunika Gunawardena, Rajesh Rajeselvam, and Valerie Schagen.



Labs: TL: Rocks and Minerals. BL: Plants in the Schoolyard. TR: DNA from a Fruit. BR: Ocean School



Addresses from (L-R) Arunika Gunawardena, Charles Macdonald, Patrice Côté, and Rajesh Rajeselvam



L: Awarded students. TR: Address and thanks from ASLA's Executive Director, Rajesh Rajaselvam. BM: Congratulations and encouragement from Andy Fillmore, Halifax Member of Parliament. BR: Invited speaker, Michaela Kember

ASLA Science Contest for Students *(continued from page 1)*

A total of 1281 students from 20 schools across the province registered for this exciting challenge. Thousands of exam papers and answer sheets were mailed out to schools and all students completed the test on the same day. All tests were mailed back to ASLA, were organized, and submitted for grading. At each grade level, the top ten scoring students as well as the top scoring student within each participating Regional Centre for Education were identified and invited to attend an awards ceremony.

The awards ceremony took place on May 25th, 2024 at Dalhousie University's Life Science Centre and Steele Ocean Science Building Atrium. The top scoring students, their parents and families, and teachers were all invited to attend. ASLA's administrative assistant, Samantha Beal, served as the MC for the event. The ceremony opened with a Mi'kma'ki land acknowledgement by ASLA's Executive Director, Rajesh Rajaselvam. ASLA President, Arunika Gunawardena, then addressed the crowd, explaining her inspiration behind the contest and expressing her astonishment and joy at the participation numbers and the remarkable achievements of the students. She then shared a statement from the Honourable Becky Druhan, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, who congratulated the students on their impressive accomplishment.

Next, Chuck Macdonald, Dean of the Faculty of Science at Dalhousie University, spoke to the audience, urging the students to remain involved in science and to work towards safeguarding our natural environment. Andy Fillmore, the Member of Parliament for Halifax, also congratulated the students and voiced his enthusiasm for their accomplishments and ASLA's efforts to engage Nova Scotian students with scientific pursuits.

The invited speaker, Michaela Kember, who is a medical student in Dalhousie's Faculty of Medicine, delivered a talk entitled "Where Science Can Take You." She inspired the award-winning students by sharing her scientific journey to date.

The presentation of awards began with the top-ten students from each grade, with the top-three scoring students receiving cash prizes.

ASLA's Executive Director, Rajesh Rajaselvam, finished the ceremony by offering his closing remarks and thanks to all who helped to make the contest possible – especially the participating students and their families. The ceremony was followed by a reception which offered a chance for students and their family members to mingle and enjoy some refreshments.

Women in STEM Mentorship Network (continued from page 1)

In February 2025, ASLA established the Nova Scotia Women in STEM Mentorship Network (WSMN), aimed at encouraging young women to participate in STEM activities and education through representation and mentorship. The WSMN was introduced to the public in April 2025 with a pilot event, a virtual Q&A seminar for self-identified girls in grades 10-12 and their parents.

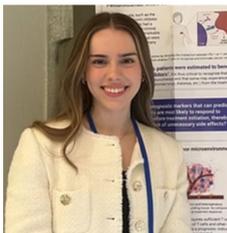
The newly established ASLA Women in STEM Mentorship Network (WSMN) consists of twelve volunteer women from various STEM backgrounds, encompassing every experience level from undergraduate students to university professors and industry scientists.



Dr. Arunika Gunawardena



Dr. Wasundara Ferando



Dr. MC Wasson



Dr. Shanika Abeysooriya



Meredith Fraser



Samantha Hodge



Tiara Mulder



Michaela Kember



Bakhmala Khan



Erika Kember



Cora Mitchell



Valerie Schagen

Women in STEM Mentorship Network (WSMN) Mentors

On April 8th, 2025, the WSMN held a virtual Q&A Seminar for self-identifying girls in high school and their parents. Thirty-three questions were submitted from curious future scientists prior to the event and during the seminar. During the seminar, students had their questions answered about career paths available in STEM, what it's like to attend medical school, and how to overcome challenges facing women in STEM fields. After the seminar, students reported feeling more confident, knowledgeable, and excited about STEM. The seminar reached sixteen students from eleven schools, including schools in the Halifax, Chignecto Central and Cape Breton, and Tri-County (Yarmouth/Digby) Regional Centres for Education.

A webpage has been added to the ASLA website, where visitors can learn about the WSMN, sign up for future events, and submit questions to our mentors!

ASLA the AST Conference

The Atlantic Science Links Association (ASLA) hosted a table in the exhibitor hall at the annual Association of Science Teachers (AST) Conference on October 24th, 2025. The AST Conference served as a valuable opportunity to meet with teachers directly and raise awareness of ASLA's offerings. Over 100 teachers visited our table. When welcomed to the ASLA table, teachers were presented with information on all of the free science engagement resources and events that ASLA offers to teachers and students, with a special emphasis on the Speakers Bureau, Conference for Science Teachers, and the newly launched Women in STEM Mentorship Network for self-identifying high school girls. All of the available ASLA informational pamphlets, Conference for Science Teachers flyers, and WSMN introduction handouts were taken home by interested teachers. The conference also offered ASLA an opportunity to connect with other organizations that share the mission of enriching science education in Nova Scotia to spread the word about our work and explore opportunities for future collaboration.



ASLA Administration Assistant, Valerie Schagen at the AST Conference

TEACHERS' COMMENTS

Conference for Science Teachers

"All four labs were engaging and inspiring. Loved how hands-on and applicable each lab was. I will definitely be using these resources in my teaching."

"The enthusiasm of the presenters is quite contagious."

"Very relevant to the grades and classes I teach."

"Great to be part of the ASLA Science Conference 2025! Thank you for all your efforts for planning this!"

"Feeling very motivated and inspired! Thank you so much for such an amazing day!" "I really enjoyed the sessions! Hopefully more will be offered! :)"

"Thank you for an amazing conference! I will definitely be returning."

"Very relaxed and welcoming environment."

"Looking forward for the next ASLA Conference!"

"I feel that I've learned about resources that I can go back and share with my coworkers."

- Science Teacher

"ASLA's services to students and science teachers in NS are Invaluable"

- Junior-high Teacher

Science Contest for Students

"We are truly grateful for this fantastic opportunity you have provided for our children. Thank you for doing this work"

"ASLA's work to promote outreach is impressive. Keep up the excellent work"

"We really enjoyed the ceremony; it was nicely done. Thanks for all your work and for making the day special"

"Great work. Keep records to determine how many students who participated in this contest were inspired to do a science degree after graduating high school"

"Thank you for everything you did and thank you for the chance to give us a chance to know this great association"

"We appreciated the opportunity to participate in the contest and enjoyed the experience"

Women in STEM Mentorship Network (WSMN) Q&A Seminar for High School Girls

"The seminar was very useful and taught me a lot about how I can be involved in stem in high school and university. "

When asked how you feel after the seminar, students said: "Confident." "More knowledgeable." "More confident about my choices." and "I feel like it is a great area for me to explore."

"Extremely useful. Definitely answered my questions while also reinforcing information I previously knew."

"Thank you so much for the amazing opportunity! :)"

"[I feel] very excited about STEM and hopefully working in the field someday."

- High school student

ASLA STUDENT AND TEACHER IMPACT

QUICK STATS

Science Contest for Students

1281 Students

Conference for Science Teachers

22 Teachers

Women in STEM Mentorship Q&A Seminar

16 Students

Science Fair Mentoring/ Judging

4 Science Fairs

Association of Science Teachers Conference

100+ Teachers

Speakers Bureau

400+ Students

ASLA welcomes participation from schools and volunteers

ASLA provides several services (listed on the front page). One of our most popular is the Speakers' Bureau. Through the Speakers' Bureau, we assist schools in finding volunteer scientists and innovators to speak to students across the province. And the best part is, **it's completely free!** So you can bring exciting, hands-on science learning into your classroom at no charge. To make a request or to find out more about the Speakers' Bureau go to www.atlantiscielinks.ca or email us at asla@dal.ca.

Strong volunteer commitment helped us to impact nearly two thousand students and teachers in Nova Scotia. Science outreach initiatives at universities, federal and local government departments, research organizations and industries added some strength to our volunteer base as new groups linked with ASLA to strengthen their ability to connect to P-12 teachers. With the increasing demand we still need more volunteers (especially in rural areas of the province) to reach many more students. To register yourself as a volunteer, please go to <https://www.atlantiscielinks.ca/volunteer-1> or contact us at asla@dal.ca.



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Arunika Gunawardena (President/ASLA), Professor (Biology), Dalhousie University

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT, ASLA

Valerie Schagen, Master's Student (Biology), Dalhousie University



ASLA Administrative Assistant

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