

Positive energy: ASLA celebrates Nova Scotia's most promising future scientists

Written by Kenneth Conrad; photos by Daniel Jardine

On a picture-perfect summer day during a quiet time on Dalhousie University's calendar, visitors passing through the Studley Quad on August 11 couldn't help but notice the filming of a television series taking place, with actors and extras portraying private school students on a fictional campus.

Just a few metres away inside a chemistry building auditorium, a select group of real-life students were the main attraction. As the top performers from the Dal-based Atlantic Science Links Association's (ASLA) third junior high science contest, 46 up-and-coming Nova Scotian stars of STEM and their families were invited to celebrate their achievements.

"I can already feel the positive energy in the room," said Dr. Arunika Gunawardena, ASLA's president and a professor in the Department of Biology, when starting her opening remarks.



The charitable science outreach group's three editions of the contest have reached over 4,700 students across the province since 2019, with the goal of inspiring a love of science and encouraging participants to pursue university studies.

“We wanted to challenge our students to showcase their impressive scientific knowledge, and they did,” Dr. Gunawardena said. “We believe one of the best ways to engage our young children in science is through outreach programs, and we genuinely appreciate our Dean of Science Charles Macdonald’s vision for outreach and his support for our association.”

“This is a big deal,” said Dr. Patrice Côté, chair of Dal’s biology department, of the students’ achievements. “Maybe some of you are starting to write a CV and you already have something really big to put on it, so congratulations.”

Words of wisdom

The event was emceed by Valerie Schagen, ASLA’s part-time administrative assistant and a biology master’s student in the Gunawardena Lab. While graduate studies represent one path for BSc grads, professional programs, such as medicine or dentistry, provide other possibilities.

Second-year Dalhousie medical student Anisha Rajaselvam encouraged students in the audience to “reverse engineer” a life in STEM, determining what career would make them happy and working out the steps needed to get there and stay motivated.

“Step one: try everything,” said Anisha, who aside from having a love of STEM, participated in ballet, piano, debate, and several other activities while growing up in Halifax.

“Understanding what areas will motivate you, activate your brain, and bring you joy is crucial in making your future career choices.”

Anisha, who graduated with an undergraduate Honours degree in biological physics from the University of Toronto before returning home for medical school, said she always knew she wanted to be a doctor, but still uses her evaluation process to determine what medical specialty would make her excited to come to work – even after being woken up by an urgent 3 a.m. call.

While there are a lot of difficult decisions along the way, she expressed confidence the students will make the right choice: “Wherever you end up, your STEM brain will serve you well!”

By the numbers

Altogether, 1,466 students from 22 schools across all seven of the province’s English-language regional centres of education wrote their grade’s test in April 2026, with the 46 participants who ranked among the top 10 scorers from grades 7-9 presented with certificates. New Glasgow Academy led the way with 15 top performers, while Armbrae Academy, located a few steps away from Dal on nearby Oxford Street, had eight.



A post-event reception was held on campus in the Beaty Centre for Marine Biodiversity, offering families – in particular those from outside Halifax – a chance to explore exhibits showcasing Dal's ocean research and tanks of marine life, including an extremely rare blue lobster, a recent addition to the Beaty Centre.



A labour of love

Creating the tests begins several months in advance of when students sit down to write them. Potential questions on a range of topics in the natural sciences are suggested by ASLA's volunteer network of faculty, instructors, and grad students, with a small committee tasked with paring them down to 40 for each of the three grades, a process that leads to "many friendly debates," said Dr. Gunawardena. "This is too easy, this is too hard, does this fit with the curriculum?"

All of ASLA's programming, from the student-focused contest and mentorship program for women in STEM, to its conferences and resources for teachers, would not be possible without a strong network of volunteers, most of whom balance busy schedules as working professionals, faculty members, or university students.

The contributions of the entire ASLA community, including the students in attendance and their family members, teachers, and principals, were recognized in closing remarks by Prof. Rajesh Rajaselvam, ASLA's executive director and a University Teaching Fellow in the Department of Biology.

"Your presence is what makes events like these meaningful and impactful."



ASLA is grateful for the funding provided by Dalhousie University's Faculty of Science, Engineers Nova Scotia, and the National Research Council of Canada.

ASLA's board members would like to offer a special thanks to all their volunteers, including:

1. **Prof. Angela Crane**, a University Teaching Fellow in the Department of Chemistry, for preparing bubble sheets and scanning them
2. Gunawardena Lab members **Abi Dixon** and **Sophia Williams** for helping organize the award ceremony
3. **Dr. Dan Jackson**, Director, Facilities & Operations, Faculty of Science, for helping to book the Beaty Centre
4. Biology department administrator **Chris MacNeil** and staff members
5. Anyone who submitted multiple-choice questions for the test