



NC Science and Engineering Fair (NCSEF) **Frequently Asked Questions**

What is the NCSEF?

NCSEF is an annual STEM research competition for three divisions of students, Elementary (Grades 3-5), Junior (Grades 6-8) and Senior (Grades 9-12). Since 2002, the NCSEF has been the North Carolina affiliate to the prestigious [Regeneron International Science and Engineering Fair \(ISEF\)](#) (Grades 9-12) and its [Thermo Fisher Scientific Junior Innovators Challenge](#) (Grades 6-8).

Who coordinates the NCSEF?

Sponsored by the nonprofit [NC Science Fair Foundation](#), the state [NCSEF](#) is comprised of [10 Regional Fairs](#) representing all 100 counties of North Carolina. Students first compete at their local school and/or school district competition and then a select number advance to their assigned Regional Fair (based on their county). Please visit the [Regional Fairs](#) to identify your county's Regional Fair Director and the date, location, registration deadline, and online registration details to participate.

Can any NC student participate in NCSEF?

Students in grades 3-12, who are residents of NC and enrolled in either a traditional public school, public charter school, private or religious school, or a homeschool in North Carolina are eligible to compete as long as they meet all of the competition requirements. Students first compete at their local and/or school system competition, then advance to their assigned Regional Fair, and finally the top regional projects are advanced to the State NCSEF competition. Students promoted from all Regional Fairs will participate in the in-person State NCSEF on Saturday, March 21, 2026, at NC State University with the option to participate in the state virtual judging on March 17, 2026.

How many students can participate in a research project?

Each project can have 1, 2, or 3 students. Schools and school districts should contact their [Regional Fair Director](#) to determine the numbers of projects from a school or school system that are allowed to participate at the Regional Fair.

If I am a teacher or parent who is interested in supporting a student(s) through the research process, how can I learn more?

Teachers and parents can learn about supporting students through the research and competition process by exploring the [Teacher Information](#) and [Student Information](#) resources on the [NCSEF website](#). This link offers a suggested monthly timeline for [Guiding A Student Research or Engineering Project](#).

How does a student qualify to participate in the Regional and State NCSEF?

Students advance to their [Regional Fair](#) by one of three pathways:

Pathway 1: District Fair - if a student's school system or district has a Fair, the district's top projects are selected within the **Elementary (Grades 3-5)**, **Junior (Grades 6-8)**, and **Senior (Grades 9-12)** Divisions and respective Categories to register for their designated Regional Fair as district winners.

Pathway 2: School Fair But No District Fair - if a student's school system or district does not have a Fair, but an individual school has a Fair, then the school should contact their [Regional Fair Director](#) to get the number of school-based projects allowed to advance and register to compete in the Regional Fair based on both Divisions and Categories.

Pathway 3: Individual Students without a District or a School Fair - Interested students and/or teachers whose school or school system does not have a Fair, must contact their [Regional Fair Director](#) on how to participate and register as an individual student or 2 or 3 person team.

Can a student register for the State Science and Engineering Fair (NCSEF) without competing in a regional competition?

No. Students must compete in the designated Regional Fair and then be promoted from their Regional Fair to the State Science and Engineering Fair. Students promoted from all Regional Fairs will participate in the in-person State NCSEF with the option to participate in the state virtual judging option.

Who can compete in the Region 9 Virtual Regional Fair?

Students who are eligible to advance from the school or district level competition to their Regional Fair but are unable to compete on that date due to a schedule conflict or other limitations, must contact their Regional Fair Director to request written approval to register for the [Region 9 statewide Virtual Regional Fair](#).

What does a student need in order to participate in a Regional Fair?

- Please begin by reviewing the [Before You Start A Project](#) within [How To Do A Project](#). To be sure you follow the required safety and research requirements, you should use the [ISEF Rules Wizard](#) as it will inform you of any prohibited activities and tell you: 1) which ISEF Forms you will need to complete prior to starting your

actual research project and 2) all other required forms to be eligible. It does not take long to complete the [ISEF Rules Wizard](#) and it may make the difference in being eligible to participate.

- Additional information is also on the [Student Information pages](#).
- An original, grade appropriate research project selected through one of the three pathways above
- Complete the Regional Fair registration process and submit all registration and project materials by the regional fair deadline
- The project must follow the safety and research rules and guidelines
- Submit a Project Presentation Powerpoint using the format specific to the categories for [Science](#), [Engineering](#), or [Mathematics](#). Limit is 12 slides.
- Learn how to create a [research tri-fold poster board](#) that summarizes their research and meets all [Safety and Display guidelines](#). This is what the judges will see when they interview the student at the Fair.

What are the research categories?

Elementary Division Categories (Grades 3-5)

- Biological Sciences
- Physics and Math
- Chemistry
- Earth and Environmental Sciences
- Engineering and Technology

Junior (Grades 6-8) and Senior (Grades 9-12) Categories

- Biological Science A (Animal, Plant, Microbiology, Behavioral & Social Sciences)
- Biological Science B (Cellular, Biomedical/Health, Translational Medical)
- Chemistry
- Earth/Environmental Science
- Physics
- Mathematics, Statistics, and Data Science
- Engineering
- Technology

Where can I learn more about the general rules for safety and student research?

NCSEF is the state affiliate to the [Regeneron International Science and Engineering Fair \(ISEF\)](#) and abides by all the safety and research requirements of ISEF. [The ISEF rules and forms](#) are here. The [ISEF FAQ of Rules](#) is located here. [NCSEF General Rules](#) provides an overview of the student safety requirements and rules for safe research.

What do I do if I need financial assistance to compete in the State Science and Engineering Fair (NCSEF)?

Thanks to our [business sponsors](#) and [individual donors](#), the [NC Science Fair Foundation](#) offers limited financial assistance to families that have a financial barrier to attending the State NCSEF competition. To apply for financial assistance, please contact your Regional Director for more information.

How does a student participate in the Regeneron ISEF and Thermo Fisher Scientific Junior Innovators Challenge??

Both the [Regeneron International Science and Engineering Fair \(ISEF\)](#) (Grades 9-12) and the [Thermo Fisher Scientific Junior Innovators Challenge](#) (Grades 6-8) are the Senior and Junior Grand Awards for the NCSEF. Based on the quality of the research projects and available funding, up to 12 Senior Division projects can be selected for ISEF and the top 10% of the Junior Division projects are nominated to advance to the TFS/JIC. The [NC Science Fair Foundation](#) covers registration, travel, and meal expenses for all students selected to compete in ISEF. Thermo Fisher Scientific covers the costs for the finalists to travel to Washington, DC.

What if I have additional questions?

If you would like to speak to a [Regional Fair Director](#), please contact them directly at the email address listed for your home county in the Regional Fair listing or contact the State NCSEF Fair Director, Dr. Tom Williams, at director@ncsciencefair.org.