

"I guess for all intents and purposes, we invented a category for her class," he said.

The school awarded them blue ribbons and might have left it at that had Brown not (in her own words) "bugged" Nitsch to send the projects to the regionwide fair, too. Holman had been given 12 slots in the secondary division, and as it happened, two of them weren't filled.

"The projects aren't, probably, projects we would send ordinarily," Nitsch acknowledged. "We don't want to shut the door on anyone who wants to further their science experiences."

It took him a couple of weeks to reach that point. "You know as well as I do, in education, logistics and red tape sometimes get in the way of things," he said.

Misti Ritter, who coordinates the Greater St. Louis Science Fair for the Academy of Science of St. Louis, gave Nitsch the green light. "If a school decides to mainstream a special-needs class, that's the school's decision."

She added, "The strongest criterion for judging is deciding, 'Do these students understand the scientific method?' Regardless of the level of the class, it can have a strong science fair project. Students with special needs can have a very strong project if they are working closely with a mentor."

Still, she couldn't say if any special education classes had taken part in the fair before because judges can't tell where a project comes from once it's officially entered. "If a special-needs class has been involved with a project, there would be no formal way for a judge – or for the fair itself – to be aware of that," she said.

Becca Brown shrugs. "I don't believe we were picked as an exception; I believe we were chosen because our children put a lot of work into it, and it's evident from the projects that they did," she said.

Awards for the Greater St. Louis Science Fair's secondary division will be given out Tuesday, starting at 7 p.m. But her students feel like winners already – literally.

"When we got the blue ribbons, they thought they had already won the (regionwide) thing," she said.

They told her they had never won anything like this before. Brown had to explain to them they were just at the beginning.

Caption:

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(1) Color PHOTO by DAVID KENNEDY / POST-DISPATCH - Davario Flowers works on writing the report for his group's project on solar energy. Teacher Becca Brown of Holman Middle School helped some of her students enter a school science fair and then the Greater St. Louis Science Fair. Records are not kept, but they are thought to be the first special-needs students to have been in the fair.

(2) Color PHOTO headshot by David Kennedy/ Post-Dispatch - Ja'vion - Didn't think it fair to be left out.

(3) Photo by David Kennedy / Post-Dispatch - Alex Wheeler (left) and Gregory Jenner, both 12, show the model houses they made for their solar energy project at the science fair. They painted the houses various colors and recorded the differences in their surface temperatures when left out in the sun

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