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Student-Led Automotive Exhibit Wins Burns & McDonnell Battle of the Brains, Headed to Science City at Union Station in KC

KANSAS CITY, Missouri — A student-led proposal exploring the inner workings of cars was selected as the grand prize winner in the [Burns & McDonnell Battle of the Brains](#) STEM competition and will be the next interactive exhibit to be built at Union Station’s Science City.

Students from Tonganoxie Middle School in Tonganoxie, Kansas, created the winning concept, *Mechanical Madness: The Science of Cars*. The proposal invites visitors to explore the world of automotive mechanics through interactive, hands-on experiences. It was selected from 710 entrants through a competition that invited student teams to imagine, research and provide original exhibit concepts aligned with Science City’s mission to spark curiosity and inspire future innovators.

“Tonganoxie Middle School’s proposal demonstrates the power of student innovation,” says [Leslie Duke](#), chair and CEO of [Burns & McDonnell](#). “By focusing on cars — something we all use every day — the team created a concept that makes engineering approachable, exciting and relevant to everyday life.”

The winning exhibit will be designed and constructed by Burns & McDonnell professionals, transforming the student vision into a permanent, interactive experience at [Science City](#). Set to open in 2027, the exhibit will invite visitors to go under the hood to explore how cars work and how engineering shapes the way we move through the world.

“This proposal captures exactly what Science City is all about: learning through curiosity, creativity and play,” says George Guastello, president and CEO of Union Station Kansas City. “*Mechanical Madness* will give families a new reason to return again and again, inviting kids and adults alike to explore how everyday things like cars work.”

Each of the top 20 finalist teams in Burns & McDonnell Battle of the Brains earned a share of \$157,500 in grant money, including:

- Grand prize: \$50,000 — Tonganoxie Middle School, Tonganoxie USD 464, “Mechanical Madness: The Science of Cars”
- Second place: \$25,000 — Cottonwood Point Elementary School, Blue Valley Schools, “Sound All Around”
- Third place: \$20,000 — Graden Elementary School, Park Hill School District, “Subterranean Secrets”

- Fourth place: \$15,000 — Clinton Middle School, Clinton School District, “Disaster Strikes”
- Fifth place: \$10,000 — Ingels Elementary School, Hickman Mills C-1 School District, “Inside Out”

Since 2011, the Burns & McDonnell Battle of the Brains competition has offered a unique model for student engagement by connecting more than 45,000 students to hands-on STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) learning and helping inspire eight Science City exhibits, including [Light Lab](#), which opened in May 2025. It’s part of the ongoing commitment of Burns & McDonnell to support STEM education and community partnerships that empower students to see themselves as designers, engineers and problem-solvers.

“This unique program shows what’s possible when educators, community partners and industry work together,” says [Julee Koncak](#), director of the Burns & McDonnell Foundation. “From inspiring thousands of students to helping bring multiple Science City exhibits to life, Battle of the Brains reflects our broader mission to expand access to meaningful STEM opportunities.”

Burns & McDonnell Battle of the Brains is just one of the many [STEM-focused initiatives](#) supported by the Burns & McDonnell Foundation. Other programs include a national STEM grant program, high school job shadows, student camps and additional partnerships with other science centers around the country.

About Burns & McDonnell

Working from more than 75 offices around the world, Burns & McDonnell designs and builds critical infrastructure. Our family of companies — driven by engineers, construction professionals, architects, planners, technologists and scientists — delivers projects grounded in safety and a desire to make a difference as we make our clients successful. Founded in 1898, Burns & McDonnell is 100% employee-owned. [Learn more.](#)

About Science City

Centrally located in the heart of Kansas City and part of the historic and acclaimed Union Station complex, Science City boasts more than 325 interactive and static exhibits covering nearly 100,000 sq. ft. of inside and outdoor space. Internationally awarded for “Visitor Experience” by ASTC and regionally awarded “Favorite Family Friendly Attraction” by Visit KC Visitors Choice Awards, Science City powered by Burns & McDonnell is named one of the country’s TOP 25 science centers. Annually, it educates and entertains hundreds of thousands of science-thirsty children of all ages. Kansas City’s Science



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Center is THE place for inquisitive young minds to create, explore, and experiment with the BIG world of science through hands-on learning and non-stop fun.

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