



John Heller/Post-Gazette photos

Hannah Shaner, left, a member of the Internet Explorers team, reacts to her answer on stage at Elizabeth Forward Middle School's Learnball Tourney Friday. Teammate Perry Jackson is at right.

# Cheers for academics

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It was a bitterly cold night, and cheers and clapping echoed through Elizabeth Forward Middle School's hallways. The basketball game was in full swing in the gymnasium, but applause and cheers rang from the auditorium where students, parents, teachers and friends cheered on academics.

The event last Friday was the fourth annual Learnball tournament between the Internet Explorers team and the Netscape Navigators team.

There was something for all students. Some worked behind the scenes planning, some worked backstage or served refreshments. Others danced or sang via a video screen. Students threw balls into a basketball hoop and other students answered 30-point essay questions for their team.

If a hoop or question was missed, there was no booing, only shouts encouraging the fellow student to have better luck next time.

The tournament was an extension of the Learnball classroom teaching technique, which stresses positive reinforcement. An international organization, Learnball encourages teamwork within the classroom.

When a teacher teaches Learnball, the classroom is split into teams and each team is rewarded for basic things that all teachers want their students to do.

In Lindy Marwood's seventh-grade World Geography class, teams earn points for being quiet, paying attention, giving correct answers, remembering homework and books and shooting hoops.

Marwood learned about this teaching technique from a former teacher and said her life changed the first day she began using the Learnball method.

"It was what I always hoped teaching to be — a classroom where the students



Jackson fields a question from the Learnball panel.

are excited to learn," she said.

Marwood said the students aren't singled out when there is a wrong answer or they are talking in class.

"If I see some of the students aren't paying attention, I may say to them that the other team is listening so well that they receive an extra 10 points. With me doing that, it encourages the other team to work harder," Earl Bradley, who is retired from Pittsburgh School District and helps at the annual tournament, said it is refreshing to see enthusiasm for academics.

"We often see clapping and shouts for sports but you never see it for student learning," he said. "Kids love contest. What better way to teach them. The Learnball teams have put a new twist on the old-fashioned contests such as weekly spelling bees.

"With Learnball everyone is a winner. Other academic contests, if you

don't know the answer you are out. Here, there is something for everyone. There is a place for the smart kids, the athletic kids and everyone in between."

Atasia Spalla is visually impaired and has found her niche in the Netscape Navigator team. She performed the song "Complicated" at the tournament and often shoots hoops for her team. "This has been the best year of my life. It makes me feel so important. I love going to school every day," she said.

Myra Brown, Atasia's mother said it has been wonderful to see her daughter blossom more each day.

"It touches my heart to see what these teams have done for her," she said.

Winners of the tournament will be announced at the last day of school, Marwood said. "But, really there are only winners in Learnball."