

They're zooming all over the room. "Do you have blue eyes?" asks one student to another. "No, but I'm from a family with seven kids," replies the other student. "Who drove the farthest to get here?" says another attendee, just hoping someone will hear and reply over the roar of the crowd.

This "getting to know you" trivia game is all part of the fun at an innovative youth leadership conference sponsored by Missouri's electric co-ops.

CYCLE — or the Cooperative Youth Conference and Leadership Experience as it's formally known — lasts only three days each July. For the 60 or so high school seniors who attend, it's three days of learning about electric cooperatives, Missouri government and leadership skills. Along the way, they get to have fun and make new friends, too.

Each year, many of Missouri's electric cooperatives hold essay contests to select seniors as delegates for an all-expense-paid trip to the annual Rural Electric Youth Tour in Washington, D.C. Those co-ops send one or more winners on the week-long trip. But not everyone who writes an essay goes to D.C.

"The co-ops had a lot of good Youth Tour entrants who didn't win the big trip," says Barry Hart, CEO of the Association of Missouri Electric Cooperatives (AMEC) in Jefferson City. "But the co-ops wanted to send the kids somewhere they could learn and have fun at the same time. Our CYCLE program was born out of that need."

Some co-ops only choose to send youth to the CYCLE program for the program's leadership training and co-op education it offers young co-op members.

Now in its fourth year, CYCLE has grown from 30 attendees to 60 this year, with 30 cooperatives sending delegates. The youth program is always held the last Wednesday, Thursday and Friday of July in Jefferson City.

From the initial trivia game on, students are energized and off and running from daybreak until lights out, forging friendships they'll take home along with what they learn about cooperatives, leadership and government.

While the conference is short, CYCLE is jam-packed with activity.

One of the team-building exercises is the "Build a Cooperative" game, where students are divided into teams and given a box of supplies they can use to build a model of their own member-owned business. Their objective is to explain the final project as if they were teaching a first-grade class, showing how power gets from a transmission source to the child's home.

Other activities include a boisterous game of Missouri Jeopardy, a segment when the teams perform a TV commercial based on something they've read in that day's newspaper and a session where the youth learn about their personalities and character through a fun questionnaire.

Another highlight is a trip to the Missouri Supreme Court where the group gets a special session with Judge Mary Rhodes Russell. She shares what cases the Supreme Court hears and how they decide cases. The judge asks the students how they might have ruled — and then she explains the actual court decision and why they made that decision.

Of course, what would a trip to Jefferson City be without a tour of Missouri's beautiful Capitol? While there, the students get to sit at the desks on the floor of the House of Representatives and debate a bill they've written with their CYCLE peers. Through this activity, the delegates see how hard it is for a bill to actually go through the process of becoming a law.

Evening activities include a barbecue, a highly entertaining evening with a hypnotist and motivational sessions with speakers such as four-time wheelchair basketball Olympiad Mike Schlappi. Through humor and motivation, Mike tells how a tragic shooting accident changed his life and discusses the lifetime of lessons and victories he's learned with the CYCLE delegates.

Ryan Roark, an attendee sponsored by Crawford Electric Cooperative, says CYCLE was educational and inspiring.

"The speakers were the best part," says Ryan.



Supreme Court judge Mary Rhodes Russell talks to CYCLE attendees about how the court decides what cases to hear.

Our future leaders

Annual CYCLE program helps high school seniors develop their leadership skills and co-op knowledge



A team of CYCLE delegates demonstrates how cooperatives get power to homes in the "build a co-op" game.

"I also learned a lot more about politics and how difficult the process of getting a bill into a law is. It's much more difficult than it seems."

Ryan did, however, have one comment to share with CYCLE program planners.

"The only thing I'd change about CYCLE is that I wish it had been longer. I had a great time."

CYCLE coordinator Mike Marsch is glad the experience is rewarding for attendees.

"We want CYCLE to be a fun, educational experience that helps bring about the next generation of cooperative leaders," he says.

AMEC's CEO Barry Hart echoes the sentiment. "We want to be a leadership development stepping stone for the youth," he says. "By us getting involved in helping develop their leadership potential, we hope these delegates go back to their communities, continue to learn from local leaders, educators and co-op staff so when they get into positions of leadership later in life, they won't forget the cooperatives' way of thinking."

For more information about the CYCLE program, log onto www.amec.org/youth.html.