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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

17th Annual AFRL Challenge Competition opens to regional high school teams

High school teams invited to train AI pilots in real-world STEM simulation

ROME, N.Y., Feb. 26, 2026 — Griffiss Institute, in partnership with the Air Force Research Laboratory (AFRL), invites high school students to put their math, science and coding skills to the test during the **17th Annual Challenge Competition**, taking place **April 6 – 10, 2026**, at the Innovare Advancement Center.

This year's challenge problem centers on training an artificial intelligence "agent" — a virtual pilot — to navigate a simulated environment, identify targets, avoid obstacles and optimize mission performance using reinforcement learning techniques. Student teams will compete to develop the most efficient and adaptive AI systems, mirroring real-world research conducted by AFRL scientists and engineers.

More Than a Competition

The annual Challenge Competition is designed to expand access to high-impact STEM learning for students and educators across the region. By engaging directly with applied artificial intelligence and reinforcement learning challenges, students gain early exposure to technical skills shaping national security, advanced research and future careers.

Participating teachers return to their classrooms with new insights and applied experience, extending the program's impact beyond the weeklong event. The competition reinforces the Mohawk Valley's role as a bridge between education, innovation, and workforce readiness.

"This competition gives students a rare opportunity to move beyond theory and apply what they're learning to the same kinds of problems our nation's researchers and engineers are working on every day," said Jeffrey DeMatteis, Test Lead at AFRL. "It's

hands-on, mission-driven and intentionally designed to help students and teachers see how classroom skills translate into real-world impact and future careers in science, technology and defense innovation."

Each participating school will provide one team consisting of a teacher and two students. Teams will work onsite for five days with direct access to AFRL technical mentors. The competition concludes with live judging, awards luncheon and cash prizes awarded to students in the form of New York 529 college savings contributions.

Now in its 17th year, the Challenge Competition has introduced generations of regional students and educators to real-world STEM problem-solving tied directly to active Air Force research.

Answer the Challenge

Does your school have students ready to turn curiosity into innovation? The 17th Annual Challenge Competition invites teams to step into the role of AI pioneers, training intelligent systems, solving real-world problems and discovering how classroom learning can evolve into vision, leadership and impact.

Schools are encouraged to register early, as participation is limited.

The Competition will take place April 6–10, 2026, at the Griffiss Institute inside the Innovare Advancement Center in Rome, N.Y. Student participants must be 16 or older, U.S. citizens, and will compete as part of a single team per school, with additional teams accepted if space allows. Student awards range from $2,500 to $500 per student for first place through eighth place, and participating teachers will receive a $1,300 stipend for the week. To learn more or register, visit https://www.griffissinstitute.org/challenge-competition/. For additional information, contact RIStem@griffissinstitute.org.

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About Griffiss Institute

Griffiss Institute is a 501c3 nonprofit organization based in Rome, NY, accelerating national security innovation through its three-pillar mission of Talent, Technology, and Venture Development. As the steward of the Innovare Advancement Center, an open, unclassified research and collaboration campus, Griffiss Institute fosters and drives partnerships across government, industry, and academia to advance dual-use technologies. Griffiss Institute is committed to strengthening national security through nontraditional STEM education, accelerated innovation, and the commercialization of emerging technologies, with a deep belief in American-made solutions, and the development of a resilient U.S. science and engineering workforce.

About AFRL

The Air Force Research Laboratory (AFRL) is the Department of the Air Force's primary scientific research and development center and one of six centers within Air Force Materiel Command. AFRL plays an integral role in leading the discovery, development and integration of affordable warfighting technologies for our air, space and cyberspace forces. With a workforce spanning across nine technology areas and 40 other operations around the globe, AFRL provides a diverse portfolio of science and technology ranging from fundamental to advanced research and technology development. For more information, visit **afresearchlab.com**.