You can be anything you want — just like a stem cell. That was a key lesson for the 500 middle and high school students from east Los Angeles at the USC Stem Cell Day of Discovery on USC’s Health Sciences Campus.

“It was a true joy to welcome the middle and high school students from our neighboring communities in Boyle Heights, El Sereno, Lincoln Heights, the San Gabriel Valley and throughout Los Angeles,” said Rohit Varma, dean of the Keck School of Medicine of USC. “This bright young generation brings tremendous potential to their future pursuits in biotechnology and beyond.”

Hosted by USC Civic Engagement and USC Stem Cell, the February 4 event introduced the students to stem cell scientists.

“Don’t be shy,” said Andy McMahon, director of the Eli and Edythe Broad Center for Regenerative Medicine and Stem Cell Research at USC. “Ask our scientists questions. Ask them about their science, but also ask them about their personal journeys that led to where they are.”

The students followed McMahon’s advice as they engaged in fun activities and lively conversations. They visited labs to get hands-on experience with microscopes and pipettes. They competed as contestants in a stem cell edition of Family Feud, viewed colorful microscopy at a 3-D computer station and attended a research poster session and resource fair. They also toured the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center and Keck Hospital of USC.

“California currently has biotechnology
as the biggest-growing sector,” said junior Richard Coca of Reseda High School. “It’s really important that students are visiting labs and learning more about the industry so they can potentially see where they’re going with their lives and careers.”

**Stem cell technology**

Earlier in the day, the students enjoyed hearing from Senta Georgia, a USC Stem Cell researcher with a lab at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles, who is seeking stem cell-based treatments for diabetes. Ismael Fernández-Hernández, a postdoctoral fellow at USC’s stem cell research center from Guadalajara, Mexico, also gave a talk about how stem cell technology could offer ways to counteract brain degeneration from disease, aging or injury.

Throughout the festivities, Felipe Osorno, associate administrator of performance management for Keck Medicine of USC, served as master of ceremonies.

“The exposure to the Keck School of Medicine of USC is invaluable for the students,” said Maria Elena Kennedy, a consultant to the Bassett Unified School District. “Our students come from a Title I School District and they don’t often have the opportunity to come to a campus like the [one for the] Keck School.”

In addition to students, teachers and parents, the event welcomed leaders from the community, business and biotech sector, and local government.

Together with these partners, USC will continue to build the future of Los Angeles as an incubator for the biosciences and world leader in stem cell research.

“As USC continues the important work of expanding our biomedical research, we will not walk this path alone,” said Earl C. Paysinger, vice president of USC Civic Engagement. “We will do so in collaboration and with the strong support of the people in our communities.”