



Real-world geography and innovative literacy learning are among the best

Top programs in public schools

BY ROB FAULKNER

Some programs touch rural Kenya or Haiti or the open road to job success. Others travel the challenging path of teaching literacy, health or life skills to the city's most vulnerable students.

The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board covered plenty of ground yesterday in its first Profiling Excellence Awards, featuring the best in local public education.

And, thanks to winner Westdale high, you can see a lot of that ground.

Its program in Geographic Information Systems (GIS), launched four years ago by teacher Dino Crapsi, lets teens use charts, tables and maps to tackle real-world problems.

After the education ministry pushed GIS as a valuable career skill, Crapsi began to explore his twin loves of geography and computing. He began with a bank of seven computers, but took students further by letting them map a world of data they often selected.

"Yeah, we've had some bogus ones, like Dog Spraying in Churchill Park, but they're using the skills and it keeps them interested in learning," said Crapsi, who notes Westdale has two dedicated GIS courses and teaches GIS in every geography course.

Students, who have won awards at McMaster University, have done projects like Road Kill Patterns on Cootes Drive, Graffiti Patterns in the Westdale Community, Ambulance Station Locations and even An



Westdale teacher Dino Crapsi says Geographic Information Systems is popular because students are finding solutions to actual problems.

GARY YOKOYAMA, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Efficiency Analysis of Beer Truck Delivery Routes.

Coming soon, they'll help Westdale's caretaker map fire escape routes to see if any school stairwells are overburdened. An archeologist Crapsi met in Second Cup may enlist students to help in

his field research.

"That's why it's become so popular. They pick projects they want to do and they realize these are real-life problems they'll find solutions to," said Crapsi, noting student GIS work found routes that could save school board delivery drivers thou-

sands of kilometres a year.

Six judges chose winners of the Profiling Excellence awards from applications schools sent in. They were a board superintendent, a vice-principal, head of an elementary teachers' union, staff at Dofasco, the Hamilton Teachers Credit

Union and the Industry Education Council.

Barton Secondary vice-principal Randy Gallant, who chairs the year-old Profiling Excellence committee struck by education director Chris Spence, said the goal is to find programs, not individuals,

deserving of acclaim.

Judges measured programs on their record of performance, community links, specialization in a field, teaching practices and innovation.

At Parkview secondary, near Ivor Wynne Stadium, a vocational school where some kids arrive in Grade 9 reading at a Grade 2 level, excellence came in the form of inventive reading material.

"I had a course called Workplace English, where you study WHMIS (Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System) and basic traffic signs. And I just thought to extend that four years ago to include the (Ontario) Driver's Handbook," said literacy teacher Michael Leslie.

He got rave reviews from parents, thrilled their kids were learning something useful. Leslie vowed that, even if it had to happen before or after school, he'd try to involve more students in the study of the driver's handbook.

The result was a literacy initiative called Drive to Success, in which students meet with teachers at lunch and are eventually able to pass the driver's test required for many entry level jobs.

"This is not a driver's ed program. It's a literacy program for below grade readers," said Leslie, amused that observers often dwell on the fact he gave up his lunches to help students who often grow up in poverty.

rfaulkner@thespec.com
905-526-2468