

Williams Teacher aims to inspire students with grant



By Brock Weir

Throughout his first year as a teacher at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School, teacher Richard Casagrande has been devoted to developing individual lesson plans for students who thrive outside of the traditional classroom setting but resources have only allowed him to take his vision just so far.

Thanks to a significant boost from Best Buy Canada last week, however, the Personalized Alternative Education teacher is now able to realise his vision of stepping away from tradition and into a modern, relevant world.

Sixteen schools across Canada, from over 220 applicants, will receive a cash infusion from Best Buy Canada's School Tech Grant program and Mr. Casagrande's pitch on how a grant would make his students "motivated and inspired" secured Williams a place on the list, making it the only York Region school to secure a \$10,000 cheque.

"We're super-excited to be here," said Best Buy's Ryan Stuart, presenting the cheque to the class on Friday afternoon. "Our School Tech Grant program exists to give Canadian students the right technology to keep them inspired, motivated and empowered." Added Williams' Principal Christopher Hilmer: "We really appreciate what Best Buy has done for us. This is a huge opportunity and I am really thankful that Mr. Casagrande took the time to put in the application. He was really thinking about students in his classroom. Knowing he is a huge supporter of technology and using technology in education, he thought, "How can we use that money to support your learning?" He has a great vision for what this room is going to become in large part to this money."

So, what is the vision? Mr. Casagrande, an Aurora resident, sees his classroom becoming a hub for a "personalized approach" to education, as well as an environment where "modern learning" is a key.

A lot of the work carried out in the Personal Alternative Education class is group work, but the Best Buy Grant will allow them to upgrade their computers, obtain new Chrome Books, and noise-cancelling headphones to allow quick and portable access to education.

"To me, this is what the classroom is evolving into: having options," he tells The Auroran. "It is totally different from when I went to school and not as traditional as it used to be. Things are evolving and I want to help them along the way. Updating [the technology] can immediately get them the information and give it to me. I use Google Classroom and it is a lot easier when they all have access to technology to type and dictate. Right now it is a race to get to six or seven computers and unless they bring their own, it is hard for everyone to be connected at the same time."

But it is also about making the classroom feel comfortable at the same time. Many of the students in the Personalized Alternative Education class come into their own there, coming through the door credit-deficient, perhaps having experienced a medical circumstance where they are unable to go into a more traditional classroom, or have anxiety in a traditional setting. They come in for a one-on-one approach, which is beneficial, but if students don't actually want to be in that classroom those benefits cannot be realised.

"My priority is to make the classroom feel comfortable," says Mr. Casagrande. "Our students are excited for change. I don't think

they know what is out there and giving them access and opportunity to discover what is out there will really benefit them in the long run and really motivate them. I have a lot of students who are unmotivated, so I am hoping this will motivate them to learn and be life-long learners, not just students right now.?

In the lead-up to the surprise cheque presentation, the teacher had students come up with a wishlist of things they would like to see. Of course, new computers, Chrome Books and iPads made the list, but some more surprising candidates emerged, including new soft chairs to make the learning experience as comfortable as possible, a new TV to allow Nintendo Wii to be incorporated into the learning experience, as well as a bar fridge to have some snacks at the ready for students who need a boost or, due to various circumstances, are unable to bring their own lunches.

?It would be nice to have some new computers because they are all kind of old,? said student Kristina Pinter. ?A change of scenery would also be nice ? and the mini-fridge would be cool as well. Having a whole new classroom would be cool because most people don't even have that kind of technology in their house. This will make learning a lot easier.?

The call for new computers was shared by fellow students Zinab Fazi and Garrett Tutkaluk, sitting in front of a bank of three desktops.

?These ones take five minutes or so to turn on,? said Garrett, showing four separate Google Chrome windows open at the same time. Yes, he had to click on the Chrome icon four times before it sprang to life.

Soon, the new equipment will arrive and Mr. Casagrande is particularly excited about a Virtual Reality headset which will, in a matter of speaking, allow him to take his students even further outside of the traditional classroom settings. A possible first stop? A virtual trip to Vimy Ridge.