

# TECHNOLOGY AND TEACHING

## 'There's lots of science in weather'

By Linda Girardi  
SPECIAL TO THE BEACON NEWS

Big Rock Elementary School teacher Matthew Olson's innovative ways — combining brainpower with technology to make science fun — has earned his school national acclaim.

Olson won a Best Buy \$2,500 "Teach Gift Card" for developing a weather project that qualified him to become one of 50 teachers in the country to receive a \$15,000 technology award for his school.

"There's lots of science in weather," a thrilled Olson said.

Every spring, Olson's seventh-grade science class treks onto the campus before the school bell rings to gather weather data. The six-week unit covers every aspect of weather, from collecting temperature and barometer readings and monitoring radar to experiencing the difficulties associated with accurate weather predictions.

Each day's assignment is completed in front of a camera, where students tape a broadcast of a customized weather forecast for their hometown of Big Rock. Each student's final product is viewed later in the day in science class.

The students become proficient and comfortable with using expansive modes of technology, including computer programs and camcorders, and then learn how to combine them into a fluid and artistic weather presentation.

"We blend the weather with what they are doing in geogra-

phy and social studies, so sometimes, the weather forecasts are from foreign continents — they are truly having fun while they learn."

The broadcasts get creative when students apply their astronomy lessons and information on the solar system to appear as though they are forecasting the weather from the moon.

"It beats learning science from a book," seventh-grader Tyler Ott said.

Olson said it's gratifying to see how enamored students become with creating weather forecasts, perfecting their own weather reporting style and shining on camera. Many of them assume leadership roles to help fellow classmates with their projects, he said.

Many of the seventh-graders have completed the weather unit wanting to become Chicago's next television meteorologist, Olson added.

"The students realize how difficult it is to forecast the weather — it's really an art."

Olson, in his fourth year of teaching, said seventh-grade weather forecasting is still fairly basic, but his students quickly gain an appreciation for the amount of work that goes into a forecast and what a meteorologist goes through to put together a three-minute report.

"Right now, we're limited to a single computer. The Best Buy awards will help us incorporate the use of several computers, upgrade cameras and make the schoolwide system wireless,"



SUBMITTED PHOTO

**Big Rock Elementary School science teacher Matthew Olson helps his seventh-graders gather weather data, a project for which Olson won a Best Buy \$2,500 'Teach Gift Card.' He also qualifies to become one of 50 teachers in the country to receive a \$15,000 technology award for his school. From left are Tyler Ott, Olson, Anna Sestak, Kelsey Runyan and Rachel Michaels.**

Olson said.

The teacher said science has become much more technical — it's not just about using laboratory beakers and test tubes.

"There's much more higher-level thinking in today's seventh-grade science," Olson said.

As evidenced by Big Rock Elementary, the size of a school has nothing to do with coming up with a winning idea or landing financial support to strengthen the school's educational experiences through technology.

Big Rock Elementary has an enrollment of 200 students in kindergarten through eighth grade.

In all, 1,300 schools nationwide were selected to receive a

\$2,500 gift card. And based on the creativity of the application submitted, another 50 schools received regional awards of \$15,000 each.

The awards are part of a \$4 million Best Buy Teach Award program to reward K-12 public, private and parochial schools in the United States.

"One of the areas Mr. Olson is passionate about is technology. We encourage creativity on all levels," Principal Valerie Patterson said.

She added that the science teacher has been instrumental in landing the school grants for other projects, as well.

Olson said they immediately got excited about expanding the science project to a daily news format for broadcast from televi-

sion sets in classrooms to include daily announcements.

"We plan to designate a room as a television station where kids can tape the morning announcements. Right now our principal makes the announcements and does a fine job. We could show highlights of sporting events, art and music projects," Olson said.

Big Rock Elementary is now in the running to compete for a \$250,000 national award if Best Buy executives are impressed with Olson's idea of expanding the student communication capabilities past the science classroom and neighborhood school to servicing all three schools within the district via the Internet. The winning school will be announced in June.