

Upper Grand District School Board launches annual H2Awesome campaign for Earth Day

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The Upper Grand District School Board (UGDSB) is using water to open students' eyes to the future.

Heather Walker and Adam Bernard, organizers of the UGDSB's H2Awesome campaign, said that through its ongoing H2Awesome speaker series, the board is turning a long-running in person event into a multi-week virtual program designed to deepen students' understanding of water, climate change, and sustainability ? and to show them where they fit into that picture.

?It's also a tool to empower young people,? Walker said. ?To help them understand how they can have a role in not only how they interact with water, but perhaps have a role within their lifetime of how to support the mitigation of some of these issues.?

Originally created for Grade 7 and 8 students, the event has evolved since the pandemic. It now runs from Water Day on March 22 to Earth Day on April 22.

?This event has been going on for quite a number of years,? Walker said. ?It used to be an in-person event that focused on grade seven and eight students? and then when covid hit? this particular event transitioned to a remote format.?

?By making this event a remote, virtual event, schools within our entire geographic footprint gain access to the presenters, and so that learning really changed our approach to this event,? Walker added.

By running the program between World Water Day and Earth Day and delivering presentations virtually, organizers aim to reach more classrooms, extend learning over time, and connect students with experts they would not normally encounter.

Water is the anchor theme, but the program ranges widely.

This year's focus links topics such as space exploration, artificial intelligence, marine biology, Indigenous knowledge, creative writing, municipal water infrastructure, and agricultural engineering, all presented to students by a diverse range of expert speakers.

Each speaker is asked to share both their expertise and their personal career pathway, helping students see concrete examples of water-related work in the real world.

A key goal is to replace fear with informed hope. Rather than dwelling on crisis and catastrophe, the program emphasizes factual, data-based learning, media literacy, and practical actions students can take in their own communities.

?We always kind of express this to our speakers, that rather than coming from a crisis, anxious kind of viewpoint, we try to frame them in more of a hopeful perspective, so that kids feel like there are things that they can do, that it's not just gloom and doom,? Bernard said. ?We want things that they could actually accomplish, whether it be a small thing in their area, whether it be something within their city.?

This will be supported by physical work to complement virtual lessons and speakers.

Classroom activities before, during, and after the presentations ? from designing water systems for a model city to hands-on testing of local water quality ? are built to be experiential, cross-curricular, and problem-based.

The goal is to challenge students to think critically about information, about how they take it in, and what they do with it while working on practical projects that also connect them with the community.

Organizers want students to come away with several takeaways: that water is a finite, deeply interconnected resource; that every student has a personal relationship with water, wherever they live; and that young people can play a meaningful role, through future careers and everyday choices, in protecting that resource and addressing climate-related challenges.