

## Career Switcher nominated for Teacher of the Year

Every year the Virginia Department of Education begins a process of selection that starts with individual teachers being singled out as outstanding by their local school divisions; chooses one of these from each of the state's eight administrative regions to represent their peers as Virginia Regional Teachers of the Year; and finally narrows down the field to just one person who is recognized as Teacher of the Year for the entire state. To be selected or even nominated for this honor testifies to exceptional dedication, teaching talent, and effectiveness.

Joel Bunn, an earth science instructor at Gloucester High School and a member of the Virginia Educators' Association, the National Educators' Association, and the National Science Teachers' Association, was nominated by his assistant principal, Albert Green, for the 2009 awards during his first year of teaching—an extraordinary distinction. Though he was not finally chosen to represent the school, being nominated so early in his teaching career is a tribute that Bunn can remember with pride. Green describes him as “someone who goes above and beyond for his students . . . the epitome of a teacher that embraces Gloucester County Public Schools' motto of ‘Students First.’” He praises Bunn's “unique and effective teaching strategies that engage and maintain student interest,” as well as his “science labs that are both practical and fun.” Citing Bunn's creation of “a positive and productive rapport,” Green observes, “Students both like and respect him.”



An overall testimonial to Bunn's methods has emerged in his students' outstanding SOL results; as an individual example, Green tells of a gifted student who habitually finished his assigned class work early, then occupied his mind with mischief for the rest of the period. Bunn took the trouble to consult with all of this student's teachers to set up challenging research projects that he could work on in each class after his assigned work was done. “As a result, the student had a successful school year in all classes,” reports Green. In addition, Bunn has “stepped up and taken an informal leadership role among the science teachers as they worked in professional learning communities. We feel very privileged to have him serving our students,” concludes Green.

Bunn is a product of the Virginia Community College System's “Career Switcher” program, administered from Rappahannock Community College since its inception in 2004. This program uses 16 weeks of intensive study and a year of supervised teaching, rather than the normally required four or five years of instruction, to produce qualified middle or high school teachers in the urgently needed subjects of English, foreign languages, English as a Second Language (ESL), mathematics, and the sciences. Participants must have a bachelor's degree, 30 college credits in math or the sciences, and five years of professional work experience in a related field. (For more information about Career Switchers, please call program manager Rebecca Waters at 804-758-6858, or e-mail her at [rwaters@rappahannock.edu](mailto:rwaters@rappahannock.edu).)

Bunn's bachelor's and master's degrees in biology (with additional wetlands and ecology training) from the College of William and Mary, and his work in landscaping, as an extension agent, and with the 4-H program, put him in line for this fast track to a teaching career. “4-H was a wonderful opportunity to work with children of all ages,” he says, “and most importantly, to become an avid devotee of the 4-H motto, ‘Learn by Doing.’ I love hands-on activities in the science classroom to reinforce what my students have learned through notes and study.” He continues, “My 4-H career taught me how to teach beyond just the notes and terms. It taught me how to assess and engage different audiences, and how to construct my lessons to work with students at different levels. What I enjoyed most about high school students was the fact that they were halfway between wanting to learn themselves and have fun, and wanting to take responsibility as teen counselors for helping others learn. I want to teach students about responsibility as well as science.”

Speaking of a recent plant-growing project, he says, “Students who didn't pay attention to the directions on their seed packets had poor germination. Those who put too many seeds in a pot saw how they can choke each other out. Those who failed to water them regularly had wonderful life start, only to die off overnight when they dried off.” It was as much a lesson in life as in botany, he says—“paying attention to the details, putting in the effort, and most of all assuming responsibility for a living thing.” It also taught “the important concept that sometimes you can do everything right, but through circumstances beyond your control something can still go wrong . . . With living organisms, we can certainly predict or expect a specific outcome, but we can never count 100 percent on how it will actually turn out.”

A particular favorite of Bunn's is the volcano project that many students construct during elementary school. “Asking them to do it again in high school actually awakens that enthusiasm they had back then.” He quotes one of Robert Fulghum's books, telling how Fulghum asked an elementary school classroom how many of them could sing, draw a picture, or write a story . . . and all the children raised their hands. In asking the same three questions at a high school, he got almost no response. Fulghum concluded that high school students have learned to insert the word “well” into these questions—“can you sing well, draw well, write a story well?”—and that if they are not experts, they don't have the confidence to claim any ability, and have “lost all joy or interest in the activity.”

“I like the volcano project,” says Bunn, “because it takes [my students] back to when they could create freely, yet it holds them accountable for incorporating their new learning—what type of volcano? Label the parts. Tell me how it works. Students really got into it, and many of them were very creative in approaching it.” As well as the fourth-grade standbys of vinegar, baking soda, and food coloring, students updated their experiments with the latest combination of Mentos candies and Diet Coke: “They have adapted”—and grown—“yet it was still very important to many of them to see it erupt, so we took a day outside and set them off. It was very cool. I think students need to express themselves, and to see how their new learning can still mesh with those skills.”

Bunn does not encourage childish behavior—“I tell my students on the first day, ‘I know you are still in high school, but I'm going to treat you like an adult until you give me a reason not to. That means more freedom, but it also means more responsibility.’” He is no tyrant, however. “If students are talking during their labs or activities, that's fine. I don't require a silent room, because life and the workplace don't give us silent rooms. I try to conduct business in the classroom as I think they will experience it in life. They don't have to raise their hands during discussions, but they do need to respect others. One of my syllabus rules is pretty simple but applies to everything. It says, ‘I will communicate reasonably, act appropriately and perform purposefully.’ I hold myself and my students to that and they respond very well.” He adds, “I love the good-natured class clown . . . the student that knows when to cut it off and when to turn it on. They help other students to relax, as long as they don't overdo it. I really do like a varied classroom. Otherwise it gets boring for the teacher and the students.”

A farm boy who grew up in the Blue Ridge Mountains and participated in Boy Scouts and Future Farmers of America, Bunn credits his family with his love for teaching. Both parents were lifelong educators, and now his sister, brother, and sister-in-law teach as well. “I teach because I love to share what I know with someone else,” he says. “I like to inspire, and I like to see someone look at things from a different angle and suddenly appreciate them.”