

Chippewa Valley Schools names teachers of the year

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CLINTON TOWNSHIP — Chippewa Valley Schools has named its 2014-15 teachers of the year.

Andrew Kohl, a physics teacher at Chippewa Valley High School, and Deborah Richnak, a third-grade teacher at Mohawk Elementary, earned the honor.

“What I like about them, and I visited both classrooms, is that they just have excellent relationships with their kids,” Chippewa Valley Superintendent Ron Roberts said. “When you talk to students about them as teachers, you hear all of the things you want to hear about a teacher. They’re not only presenting good lessons, but really caring about each kid and taking whatever steps are necessary to help kids succeed. They’re excellent people.”

Kohl and Richnak both said they were humbled by the acknowledgement.

“It’s kind of embarrassing really. I think I work as hard as everyone else does, and I think everyone is as equally deserving as I am,” Kohl said.

“I really enjoyed the award and the accolades, but there are a lot of other teachers out there that work as hard as I do, and also deserve the award. It definitely is an exciting feeling to know that after all these years, all the hard work has been recognized,” Richnak added.

Richnak has been teaching at Mohawk for 21 years, and in the district for 28 years. Kohl has taught at Chippewa for 16 years.

Shannon Bolak, another third-grade teacher at Mohawk, said in her recommendation for Richnak that her ability to evolve her teaching methods with new technology over the past three decades made her stand out.

“When our district purchased SMART boards for every classroom, Debbie (Richnak) took the initiative to become a pioneer and train other third-grade teachers in our district on how best to incorporate technology into our classrooms to engage and promote learning,” Bolak wrote. “She has created and shared many SMART board lessons that allow students to stay engaged during lessons.”

While Richnak incorporates technology into her lessons daily, Kohl’s strength has been to adapt physics lessons with real life examples.

“When Andy (Richnak) shares his ideas and construct lessons, it is always with a real-life connection in mind,” wrote Jessica Downham, a physics teacher at Chippewa. “In his AP physics class, he demonstrates creatively by producing activities that get the students involved in their own learning. From taking his kids outside to do free fall experiments, to making them solve the energy cost of classroom lights in our building, he makes labs creative and relevant.”

Kohl credited Downham and Maureen Sturza, another Chippewa physics teacher, for helping him improve his teaching ability. He said that he would have rather accepted the award for the three of them instead of individually.

“They are my biggest motivators and really push me to become a better person and a better teacher,” Kohl said. “I really think that when the three of us work together, we come up with some really great things for the kids. I wouldn’t be nearly as good of a teacher as I am without working with those two.”

As veteran teachers in their respective fields, Richnak and Kohl said they remain motivated because of the growth and passion they see in their students.

"I'm always excited to get a new group of third-graders, to get to know them and watch them grow. I'm really motivated by the kids in my class," Richnak said.

"I like to see the growth in the students, that they show some sort of passion about school at some point, whether it's science or maybe it's sports, just seeing them grow and become more well-rounded people," Kohl added.

Richnak and Kohl are scheduled to be acknowledged by the Chippewa Valley Board of Education during a 6:30 p.m. public board meeting May 18 at the district's administration building.