

ROBERT E. YAGER EXEMPLARY TEACHING AWARDS

WINNER



CHRISTOPHER SARKONAK

PHYSICS AND SCIENCE TEACHER

District XVIII [Canada]
Crocus Plains Regional Secondary School
Brandon, Manitoba

SPONSORED BY:

Yager Family Trust

This award recognizes excellence and innovation in the field of science education. This award acknowledges teachers who share Robert Yager's passion for education and continued professional development. This award also honors Robert Yager's effort to make excellent science education accessible to students of the 21st century and beyond. Awardees will have exhibited excellence and innovation in the field of science education and embody the mission statement of NSTA. Six awardees will be selected annually.

The individual awardees will receive \$1,000 to participate in any of the NSTA 2025-2026 conference offerings and a plaque.

The physics program at Christopher Sarkonak's school has nearly tripled in size from what he took over seven years ago; there are more girls interested in physics, and there are more students from every academic background that now know that they can be successful in a challenging program with his guidance. Sarkonak often introduces most topics with a lab or demonstration, hooking students, but the way he prompts and guides students leads them to discover most of the topic before they even begin speaking about it. He has them discuss their observations and coaches them in how to think scientifically so that they can come to the conclusions themselves.

Understanding students' test anxiety and how that can interfere with the demonstration of learning, he runs a classroom without tests. Having students from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, he does his best to respect and value their time, so there is also no homework in his classroom. Valuing students' well-being and mental health is a large part of what has led him to innovate and create a system that is more sustainable for the students and him. This perspective has led Sarkonak to create a system based on feedback and building portfolios of work, so as not to punish, discourage, and demotivate students in their learning. To develop grades and give students agency and ownership, he builds the course with students at the start of the semester. He talks to them about their learning: what they want to get out of a course and the things that stand in their way. This has led to a student-driven program that is among the most popular programs in the school.

Elliot Baldwin, Science Teacher, Crocus Plains Regional Secondary School, shares that "Students are even requesting to be transferred from other schools even if only for this singular course and teacher. After talking with some of these students, they confirm that Christopher Sarkonak's course is often more challenging than others, but they are drawn in regardless because of how accessible he makes the content and how enjoyable he makes the learning experience."