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Funds award prize for innovative teaching initiatives

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Ten Israeli teachers to be awarded prize aimed at “encouraging and highlighting entrepreneurial working patterns in the education system.”

Ten Israeli teachers from schools across the country will receive the Recanati- Chais-Rashi award for the Entrepreneur Teacher, a prize aimed at “encouraging and highlighting entrepreneurial working patterns in the education system” for the year 2012.

Each year, up to 18 school and preschool teachers from all education institutions and all sectors in Israel are chosen for the prize, which is given out by the Recanati, Chais and Rashi Foundations, three separate funds which work to advance education in the country.

The winning teacher’s initiatives, which promote pupils’ scholastic and educational achievements, each receive a NIS 10,000 cash prize for their dissemination.

First and second place projects are granted an additional NIS 25,000 to leverage scientific-educational activities among students in the schools where they are applied.

According to the funds, prizewinners are described as “field-level people in the education system who initiated

and developed singular aspects of their work and promoted the system's objectives by using innovative and creative tools."

Among this year's top winners is teacher Isaac Gvili from the Shapira high school in Netanya, in which about half of the students are originally from France, Ethiopia or countries of the Former Soviet Union.

Gvili, with the cooperation of the school principal, academics, hi-tech professionals and the Ramon Foundation, launched a special Science, Technology and Environment project designed to encourage students from the 10th to 12th grade to choose physics as a central subject in which they will be tested on a high unit level in their matriculation exam.

"It started five or six years ago," Gvili told *The Jerusalem Post* on Monday. "We were faced with the question of how to help kids take five units [advanced] physics courses which will help advance them in the future.

"The goal was to take physics down from its pedestal so that students understand and feel what physics really is," he explained. "Physics is always something that makes students really uncomfortable, it is a subject considered very hard and that they see as requiring a lot of effort, so naturally they tend to go to other things."

Gvili told the *Post* that he believes there is a problematic lack of students who choose focus on scientific fields in Israel.

"We only have about 6.5 percent of students doing a scientific and technology- oriented matriculation exam, it's a severe issue," he said. "Not that everyone should go to physics, but I think it's a huge missed opportunity when we could easily have 20 percent of those students."

Through Gvili's initiative, groups of two or three students meet twice a week with volunteers from both hi-tech and academia who help them develop works in fields such as aeronautics, medicine and assistance to the disabled, among many others.

"We expose the student to various fields so that he can then tell us what he likes best and that's what his project will focus on," Gvili stressed.

“Unfortunately, a lot of people go through life without ever finding the one thing they love to do, I believe that if a kid finds something he likes, we need to use it.”

Their final projects count for credit towards their matriculation exam, and some of the best works are then selected and given additional credit.

To advance their work, students are personally assisted by professors from Tel Aviv University, the Weizmann Institute of Science, Bar-Ilan University and hi-tech companies.

“It’s really emotional when you see a 10th grade kid who was told he can’t complete three units of math go through our program, then gets accepted into elite IDF units and goes on to higher education,” Gvili said.

“But there is also something really sad about that: Think about the very few that we ‘saved’ and the hundreds more students in Israel that people don’t reach out to.

“It only takes one teacher to say something bad, and they believe they can’t do things,” he added. “We teachers have such an important role, heaven forbid we do it wrong.”

The prizes for the entrepreneur teachers are expected to be awarded in the coming months during a ceremony which will take place in the presence of Education Minister Shai Piron.

With the cash prize involved in the award, Gvili told the Post he hopes to expand the program, by collaborating with more hi-tech companies and possibly with the army.

Gvili also expressed interest in bringing the program into more schools in the country and is already planning the initiative with two institutions: One in the Golan Heights and one in the South of Israel.

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