

Five county schools to take part in Real World Navy Challenge

By ERIC S. SMITH
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Middle school and high school students across Chester County will be faced with an ever-growing disaster scenario beginning today.

Students from five schools throughout the county will be part of a pilot program for the Real World Navy Challenge that launches this morning.

The Challenge is a Web-based learning program that has been designed through a partnership between the Chester County Intermediate Unit, the Delaware Valley Industrial Resource Center and the U.S. Navy.

In the pilot program, students will confront a world in which the Philadelphia region has faced a severe earthquake and suffered extreme environmental damage. The plight of the region, according to the scenario, has become so bad that students will need to develop an evacuation plan.

"Students must come up with an evacuation plan, so this is really a logistics scenario," said John Branson, the coordinator of CCIU's Innovation Institute. "Every resource at their disposal actually exists. They will deal with ships and helicopters as well as a vastly reduced population.

"The idea was to use the knowledge and skills pertaining to science, technology, engineering and math, and use those skills to safely and effectively evacuate the population."

The Real World Navy Challenge is part of a larger STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) initiative and is the first major program of the CCIU's recently created Innovation Institute.

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□ Students will confront a world in which the Philadelphia region has suffered extreme environmental damage from a severe earthquake. Students must develop an evacuation plan.

The five Chester County schools that will be partaking are Valley Forge Middle School (Tredyffrin/Easttown School District), North Brandywine Middle School (Coatesville Area School District), the Center for Arts and Technology Pickering Campus, the Chester County Alternative Education STEPS Program and the 21st Century Cyber Charter School.

The idea for the Real World Navy Challenge began with the relationship between DVIRC and the U.S. Navy.

"The U.S. Navy is one of the best teaching facilities in the world, because they have to be or people die," said DVIRC Executive Vice President Tony Girifalco. "They utilize technology and problem-based learning, and we wanted to incorporate their strategy in the Real World Navy Challenge."

The CCIU got involved in the project because it had the resources to build online tools to be used in conjunction with the program, said Girifalco. The IU developed a Web site that offers students various tools including wikis, whiteboards and discussion forums. This enables students to collaborate and communicate with each other via technology, which is a key component of the program, said Branson.

"The IU really knew of the different

tools we could use," Girifalco said. "The folks at the IU are one of the bestkept secrets for how technology works in the classroom and enhances creativity."

The Real World Navy Challenge is a program that involves problem-based learning, which is a relatively new approach to education. Problem-based learning gives students a scenario or problem and they are forced to come up with a solution, but there is no true correct answer. In the case of the Real World Navy Challenge, students can generate a variety of evacuation methods and no one solution is more correct than the next.

"Problem-based learning is often referred to as generative learning, because in searching for a solution to one problem, it generates another problem," Branson said. "On the other hand, traditional classroom practices are more of a convergence approach where there is one correct answer everyone tries to converge upon."

During the Real World Navy Challenge, teachers are meant to serve more as facilitators throughout the process, according to CCIU program development coordinator Diane Thomson. In this role, teachers are attempting to learn the technology just before the students do.

"There is definitely a learning curve there (for teachers)," said Valley Forge Middle School math teacher Allison Long. "We are letting the kids be the lead on this, but we are trying to keep up and be facilitators in this whole process. I can't wait to see what the kids start up with."