

The power of coding

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When you're a kid, school's out and summer time is time for kayaks, canoes and coding?

Two dozen elementary school aged children did just that last week as they took part in the Power of Coding Camp hosted by St. Mary's Catholic School in Collingwood and offered through the Continuing Community Education program at no cost.

"This whole week is a coding camp, teaching kids how to code and program computers," said Greg Moneypenny and IT specialist and programmer who is volunteering his time to help his wife, Tina at her school. "We use a program called Scratch, which is based on a MIT language and its only purpose is to teach programming to kids."

Specifically, it teaches children the constructs of coding, decision making, collaboration, variables, but Moneypenny sees it as a great tool for the youngsters, because the program is all animated.

According to Moneypenny, the program creates an eco-system where the young programmers can share code, building off each other's work.

"We fully expect that kids will be doing this for jobs in the future," added co-host of the program Jan Dance, a special education teacher at St. Mary's.

Someone who wouldn't disagree with that thought is 12-year-old Ben Lecour, he's been learning code since 2014 after joining the coding club at St. Mary's, his home school.

"It's something that I really enjoy," said Lecour. "I like the

challenges and solving problems. I have been working on a game like Pictionary, but there was one thing I couldn't get right. I have worked on it for a couple of months and finally figured it out last week, it felt really good."

At 12 years old, Ben is one of the leaders of the school's coding club, acting as a mentor for newer members when they run into problems, something Dance attributes to the social skills developed in the club.

"Both at this workshop and in the club, the kids learn that they have to work together," said Dance. "You don't have to be the smartest, you just have to be prepared to put the work in."

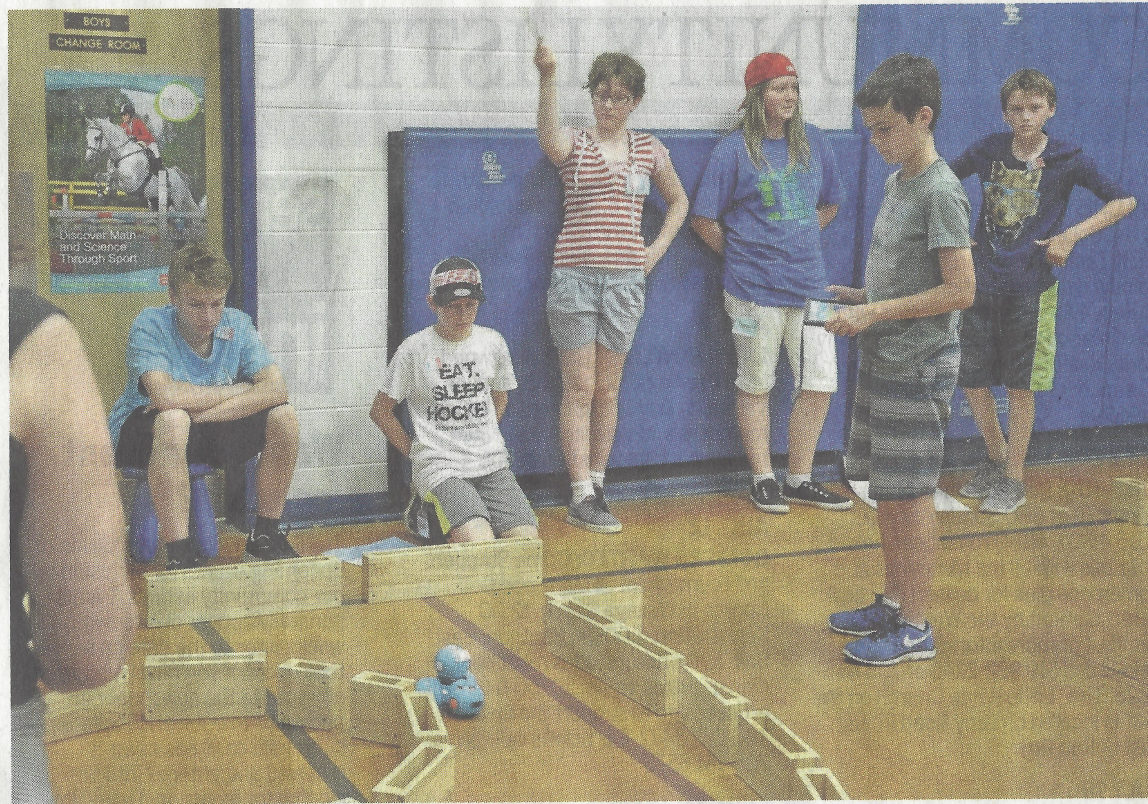
Staff running the camp knew that you couldn't just have the kids sitting in front of the computer for the whole week, so they incorporated outside activities as well as numeracy and literacy as well. There was also the chance of animating their own movies and working with robots.

For the final day, the kids competed in a five-event competition using the robots and the programs that they had created during the week, where risk and reward dictated performance.

The importance of pupils learning coding hasn't been lost on the teachers, where they believe coding is the new literacy as students face a life more controlled by technology than ever before.

"When I was in high school, our school didn't even have calculators and if you had to make a copy you used one of those mimeograph things," said Moneypenny. "I went to college to learn how to program, but look at these kids."

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J.T. MCVEIGH/PHOTO
Ben Lecour 12, takes his robot 'Google' through it's paces in an accuracy event during the Power of Coding Camp hosted at St. Mary's Catholic School last week.

J.T. MCVEIGH/PHOTO
Ben Lecour 12, checks his programming for his robot 'Google' before an accuracy event during the Power of Coding Camp hosted at St. Mary's Catholic School last week. Pupils moving on to Grades 7, 8 and 9 were invited to the week-long camp where they honed their skills in computer coding, including programming the robots for their own 'Olympics' finale at the end of the camp.