

## **Doherty teacher sends automotive teams into high gear**

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Brad Wheaton is tired of hearing it, and he hears it a lot: Auto classes are for "dumb" kids.

"It couldn't be farther from the truth," said Wheaton, 30, the automotive instructor at Doherty High School. "We have to get some of the school's smartest kids. The car is so sophisticated and advanced, you need to be skilled to work on it."

Just ask 2009 Doherty graduates Dylan Keyes and Chaz Duran. At the finals of the Ford/AAA Student Auto Skills competition earlier this month, the duo came in second out of a field of 50. Only a team from Minnesota did better.

"It's kind of cool, knowing you're the top, the best of the best," said Duran, 18, one of more than 9,700 high school juniors and seniors who entered this year's competition. "I was just kind of like, 'Whoa, that's crazy.' That's the best we've ever done."

By "we," Duran means Doherty, whose team members change from year to year. Under Wheaton's leadership, Doherty's teams have dominated the Colorado competition, winning six of the seven years he's been teaching. Nationally, they've placed in the top 25 each year and as high as third before this year.

Wheaton credits his predecessor, Jeep Parkhill, and support from Doherty, Colorado Springs School District 11 and the Phil Long Ford dealership as reasons behind the success of the school's automotive program.

Everyone else says the key factor is Wheaton.

"He's like the best teacher I've ever had," Duran said. "He does whatever he has to do to make sure you understand. Without him, we would not do as good as we do."

For those who think automotive kids are dumb, well, those students are looking pretty smart these days when it comes to employment opportunities.

Although car sales are in a deep slump, repair shops have reported an uptick in business lately, as people try to keep their cars running instead of buying new ones in the down economy.

And as cars continue to evolve - incorporating microprocessors, radar sensors and mobile-phone and hybrid technology - the skills of auto technicians need to keep pace.

"But you've got to be good," Wheaton said. "Like any industry, there's room for quality. You've got to be the best. And that's why I teach my students to be better than the next guy."

Keyes and Duran definitely learned that lesson. Racing against teams from each state, the pair had 90 minutes to repair a 2009 Ford Escape with 16 glitches, including malfunctions with the interior and exterior lights, the air-flow sensor and the starter motor. Correctly repairing each problem, they were one of only four teams to turn in a perfect car - and just five minutes away from taking the top spot.

In addition to winning a 2009 Ford Edge for future Doherty students to use in training, both students earned scholarships to continue studying auto technology. Keyes recently joined the military, but Duran is leaning toward attending Lincoln College of Technology in Denver, where he has a full scholarship.

Bob Rajala, the service manager at Phil Long Ford Motor City, provides the cars for Doherty students. For him, it's an investment.

"That's our future," Rajala said. "We have a lot of technicians that have come through the program that are working for us now. They're always good technicians. Sometimes, they're better trained than kids from colleges."