

A step ahead of Google

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WLHS senior Milo Webster develops app similar to one just announced by the tech giant

Many high school seniors feel on top of the world these days. With only weeks to go before they end their high school careers and launch new lives as independent adults, the future looks bright to them.



by: SUBMITTED PHOTO - Milo Webster spent two years developing a calendar application for students. Known as Lionworxs, Webster's app is similar to one just announced by tech giant Google.

For Milo Webster, a senior at West Linn, the future looks particularly bright. He is in Los Angeles this week presenting his work at the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair. And he has the satisfaction of knowing that his project is such a hot one that technology giant Google is currently developing a competing product.

For the past two years, Webster has been working on a computer application that he calls Lionworxs. The idea for the app came to him one summer, when he was trying to dream up ways to earn money. Knowing that some teachers pay students to design their school web pages, he began looking at those pages.

“From there, I started trying to design the optimal teacher websites,” he said. “I eventually reached the conclusion that students should have their own websites.” He’s been working on that idea ever since.

Lionworxs is an information support system designed to streamline communication between students, teachers and parents. Teachers can use it to enter homework assignments, information about upcoming tests and other class news. That information will be uploaded automatically to a database, and when students log in to the portal, their personal dashboards are updated with the current information.

Milo debuted Lionworxs to an appreciative audience at the international science fair last year. Many educators at the fair expressed interest, including the deputy superintendent of New Mexico’s second-largest school district. Although that administrator expressed interest in the program, it wasn’t ready for testing at the time.

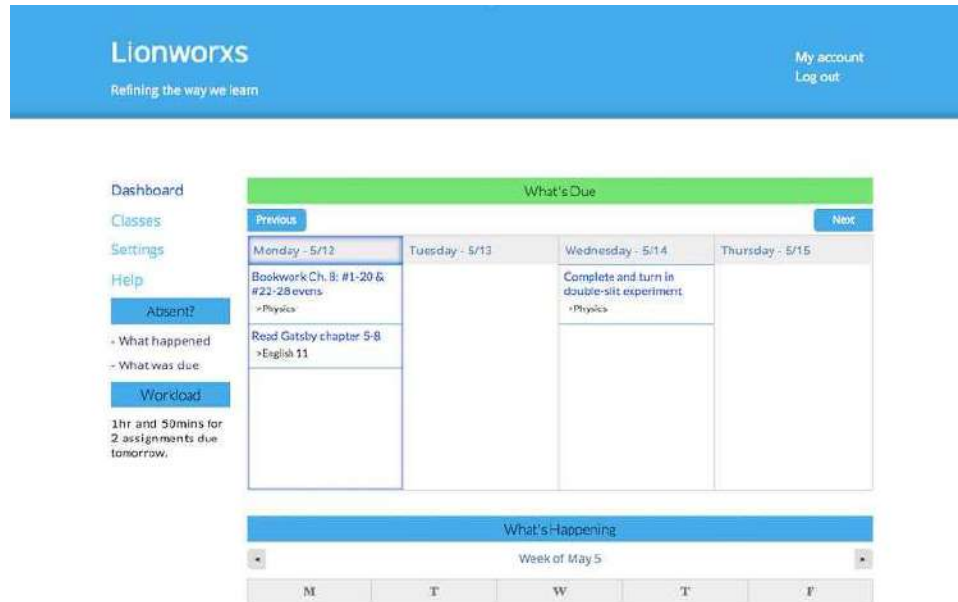
This year, Lionworxs is in beta testing, and Webster is looking forward to showing the public what it can do.

“My main excitement is the marketing aspect,” he said. “Last year, there was excitement but no marketable product. It wasn’t in prototype stage.”

This year, the product is in beta testing and ready to sell.

Katherine Holtgraves, principal of Three Rivers Charter School in West Linn, is overseeing the beta testing. Webster is a graduate of her school and has maintained ties there, including serving as a counselor for Outdoor School.

“It’s a great program,” Holtgraves said. “I’m so proud of him.”



by: SUBMITTED PHOTO - As this screenshot shows, Lionworxs is designed from the student's point of view, gathering class information and assignments into a personalized dashboard view.

A self-taught programmer, Webster found help and encouragement as he learned.

“I had a number of mentors,” he said.

An early supporter was West Linn-Wilsonville School Board Chairman Keith Steele, who made suggestions regarding computer languages and frameworks.

“He put me in a good direction,” Webster said.

Another major influence was CREST Program Coordinator Amy Schauer, who oversees the district’s own science fair.

“The first encouragement I got was from Amy Schauer,” Webster said. “She’s the one who first confirmed that I had something, two years ago.”

When he heard this month that Google was working on a similar product, any remaining doubts regarding his app’s potential dissolved. Some of his confidence dissipated, too — but only briefly — as his first thought was to concede the field to his gigantic competitor.

“I immediately thought, ‘Oh, well, I guess that’s that,’” Webster said. “After looking at it, if I have a better product, there’s a chance that will show through.”

Response to the program has been positive, overall.

“Once they understand it, they love it,” Webster said. “For parents, I am incorporating a portal that will pull all their students’ dashboards together. For teachers, when they see how much benefits there are for students, they love it. But there are also benefits for them.”

He knows that his system has some shortcomings, too. He spoke with administrators at WL-WV at the end of last year.

“They gave me some very good direction,” he said, including feedback on the app’s security elements and general design pieces.

“Schools want a single solution,” Webster said. “Right now (the app) does not have a grading system. For full implementation, it would need that.”

Lionworxs has a bright future, with its inventor heading to University of California at Santa Cruz in the fall, where he plans to study computer science and robotics.

“Students shouldn’t have to look for information,” Webster said. “All other software in this field focuses on teachers and administrators. That really leaves students behind.”

By **Kate Hoots**
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