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More kids learn outside classrooms

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More kids learn outside classrooms

GARY DAWSON STAFF WRITER

TURTLE LAKE, WIS.

If you ask many of the teachers and students participating in a new hands-on learning program at Turtle Lake Public Schools, finding a bird in the bush is worth more than looking at two in a book.

And rather than reading about regional history a classroom, students are creating their own social studies program by going into the community and interviewing senior residents about their recollections of the Turtle Lake area.

The same goes for a group of motivated students restoring an outdoor pond rather than sitting at desks and reading about the environmental value of wetlands. And for another junior high group that entertained elementary students with a Mother Goose play about

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the value of "haves" sharing with "have-nots" at Christmas. They also entertained preschoolers at a downtown day care center.

The program — known as service learning — is supported with federal funds administered by the state Department of Public Instruction through regional service offices.

The program is in its third year at Turtle Lake Junior High School and at three northwestern Wisconsin middle schools — Grantsburg, Glenwood City and Somerset. Some additional districts have initiated their own programs.

Turtle Lake is one of the few schools in the state that has established a formal, for-credit service learning class in its regular curriculum.

"You actually get to see how things are done. You see the finished product," said Jamie Hoffman, 14, one the editors of the Junior High Journal, a school newspaper published in cooperation with the town's newspaper, the Turtle Lake Times.

Educators say the concept of service learning is not new. President John F. Kennedy, for example, initiated the famous Peace Corps. Service learning has included agricultural programs such as 4-H and Future Farmers of America and shop classes in woodworking and welding.

President George Bush revived the idea with a "learn to serve" initiative that included federal financing grants to states. President Clinton continued the program. Minnesota schools were early participants.

The program differs from community service projects in one key respect, according to Cindy Becker, a youth service learning coordinator for District 11 of the state Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) at Turtle Lake. The agency serves 39 school districts in northwestern Wisconsin. Becker says service learning projects must not only meet a need in the community but have to be related to a subject students are studying in the classroom.

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In the example of the nearby pond, students apply things they have learned in science, woodworking and other courses when cleaning up the pond or building bat, wood duck, butterfly, purple martin and bat houses. They learn the history of the pond by interviewing local seniors who recall it from their childhoods.

Service learning also requires students to develop and implement their own projects, with a minimum of assistance from faculty and community volunteers who have expertise in various areas. Finally, the students must document what they have accomplished and discuss what they learned.

Robert Lamont, a social studies and history instructor at Turtle Lake, is the service learning teacher. Other faculty also participate in the program. So do parents like Ray Helling, a contractor; Scott Burhop, a pipe layer; and Dave Slack, son of Turtle Lake Times owners Jim and Anne Slack. Helling and Burhop are among those who help with carpentry skills used in building bird and mammal houses, and Slack teaches newspapering. The three have children in the school.

"I think it's going to help them when they work on their high school newspaper and improve their English and language skills," Slack said of the group of seventh- and eighth-grade students he works with.

Lamont has seen grades and attendance improve among students who don't do well in traditional classroom settings, a finding that has been verified in a preliminary program evaluation, said CESA's Becker. That group includes hyperactive and special-needs students.

"I like it. It's fun to do stuff with your hands. You don't have to sit down all day — you can walk around and go outside," said Travis Yoder, 12, a seventh-grader building a wood duck house. In the spring, his class will place a number of houses around the pond. Trees and other plantings that benefit wildlife will also be added.

This winter, students will monitor minnows in the pond to see how they survive.

There is no bigger fan of service learning than special-needs teacher Richard Kolterjohn, who has seen many of his charges excel alongside other students.

"There is so much teamwork involved in these projects that they can use their talents to participate equally along with other students," Kolterjohn explained. "It builds their self-esteem, and socially it helps them make friends, whereas in traditional academic settings they are often isolated by their peers."

Deb Slagstad, junior- and senior-high school principal, said the program has proved so valuable that it will be integrated into the school's regular budget when the state grant expires next year. Other organizations have expressed a willingness to donate money to help it continue.

"Not only are the students learning to serve their community and become good citizens, (the program) is teaching our staff to work together and with all kinds of volunteers from the community," she said. "And the latter is important. Our staff can't do these things alone. They need the volunteers."

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