

Hancock teacher expands kids' horizons with atypical approach to learning

Deb Pascoe | April 25, 2012

For [Hancock Central High School](#) teacher Brian Rajdl, all the world's a classroom. Rajdl developed the school's PEAK (Partnering the Environment and Academics on the Keweenaw) class, which began during the 2008-2009 school year. The program is open to students in grades 11 and 12.



Rajdl developed PEAK after reading educational research on the most effective ways students learn. Upon reading that hands on, project-based, cross-curricular, real-world, place-based learning has the greatest educational impact on students, Rajdl designed a course to follow the research.

"It really bothers me that we know how students learn best but closed minds and tight budgets do not allow it. It's like science finding a new really effective treatment but then never using it," says Rajdl. "Teach how we know kids learn best."

Rajdl describes PEAK as "a different way of learning. Students know there are no tests or quizzes; just projects, effort, responsibility. It is an easy transition to doing more outside. We do the basics of preparing for the outdoors, basic snowshoeing skills, how to ride tandem bikes. All start from the basics with a safe, inclusive atmosphere. We do real projects. Students know they will have a real impact on their class, school and community."

For students who have spent most of their educational careers sitting quietly in a classroom, the PEAK program can take some getting used to.

"It takes us a long time--months--to break the mold they are used to: 'Come in, sit down, get out a notebook.' We are constantly reminding students that this is a different sort of class and to embrace something different. We meet outdoors as often as possible at our outdoor classroom," says Rajdl.

Students might have two teachers for the day or they might have none, instead teaching each other, or attending outside educational opportunities.

"Students commit to time out of class for lectures, presentations, or films being shown in the evenings. Students help decide the direction of the class and projects tackled for the year. Once the mold is broken students open up and really embrace it," Rajdl says.

What kind of student is the typical PEAK student? "Kids that want to avoid British Literature!" jokes Rajdl. "We get a good cross-section of students, and it is how we designed the class, to be very heterogeneous. We get from special education to very high ability. We get a lot of kids that like the outdoors, and a few that are just up for something new."

Service-based class projects have included repairing fences in the community, performing home energy audits, and making repairs to the bridge at the Swedetown Creek trails. Course-based lessons take a local slant when students learn about geology through a discussion of local mining issues and concerns.

"Learning in context, it provides the real world connection to material, and helps students with that age old question "Why do I need to learn this?" says Rajdl.

Students are graded holistically, which Rajdl defines as "Grading the whole student, not just achievement on assignments. Students are pushed out of their comfort zones, and their willingness to try new things is reflected in their grades. Leadership, participation, stepping back and not being the leader, helping others, helping us. All is reflected in the student's growth and grade."

"They get a lot of freedom with this class, but we are constantly reminding them of the responsibility of that freedom," he says.

Deb Pascoe of Marquette is a freelance writer and a peer recovery coach for Child and Family Services of the U.P. A former columnist for The Mining Journal, her book, "[Life With a View](#)," a collection of her past columns, is available in area bookstores.