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## Getting hands-on science

Hancock students involved in new learning program

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HANCOCK - For Brian Rajdl, learning is more than a teacher just lecturing students from a textbook; having students actually putting their hands on the subject being taught as much as possible is much more effective.

With that hands-on philosophy, Rajdl developed the Partnership for the Environment and Academics in the Keweenaw, which is interdisciplinary with other school subjects, such as English, and includes community involvement.

For that effort, in October Rajdl learned he received the Michigan Alliance for Environmental and Outdoor Education Award. Also receiving the award was Darrell Hendrickson, Washington Middle School seventh grade science teacher.

Rajdl, who teaches ninth through 12th grades at Hancock Central High School, said he appreciates his efforts are being acknowledged.

"It's neat to receive something," he said. "You usually don't get a lot of recognition in the education field."

The idea to create PEAK came from his concept of what teaching is about.

"That's my drive," he said. "It's kind a mission of mine to get people to connect with the outside."

Rajdl said he modeled the PEAK program, which is for 11th and 12th grade students, on similar school programs in Wisconsin and the Pacific Northwest.

"I wanted to create an outdoor-based course and I wanted to follow the research (on environmental issues)," he said.

The PEAK program began in the 2008-09 school year, and already Rajdl said he thinks it's going well.

"It's an incredible success," he said.

Rajdl said besides students and other faculty personnel, the PEAK program also involves members of the community, such as Michigan Technological University, which provides resources, staff and financial support to some extent, and the Keweenaw Land Trust.

Since PEAK is about studying the environment, Rajdl said he thought it important that study be done in as environmentally friendly a way as possible, so to get to many of the study sites, students ride bicycles, snowshoes and skis.

"Students know sometimes we're going to go beyond the normal two hours (class time)," he said.

They also carpool when the site is too far away, Rajdl said. The alternate transportation also saves the school the cost of renting a bus, which can be \$500 per day.

Rajdl said one of the PEAK partners is the KLT, and students carry on studies at the organization's property near Boston Pond. They also do studies at Swedetown Creek in Hancock. One of the projects students conduct is a fish count for the Department of Natural Resources in Boston Pond, which saves the agency money and helps students understand the dynamics of such an ecosystem.

"It's a perfect fit," he said.

As part of the interdisciplinary aspect of the PEAK program, Rajdl said students work with Hancock Central High School English teacher Steve Smith when writing their reports and doing reading on a particular subject.

"We weave them together," he said. "It's a good day if (the students) don't know if it's an English or science day."

Besides teaching high school students, Rajdl said he takes part in conferences where he instructs other teachers about PEAK. Officials at Tech are considering creating a grant for him to continue spread the word about the program.

"We want to share what's working," he said.

### Article Photos



Kurt Hauglie/Daily Mining Gazette  
Hancock Central High School science teacher Brian Rajdl explains the workings of human genetics to his students on Nov. 25. Rajdl recently received a Michigan Alliance for Environmental and Outdoor Education for creating the Partnership for the Environment and Academics in the Keweenaw, which is interdisciplinary with other school subjects, such as English, and includes community involvement.

Hancock Central High School Principal John Sanregret said he's very appreciative of Rajdl, who started teaching at the school during the 2004-05 school year.

"Brian is a good representation of the quality of the staff and faculty here," he said. "We've worked hard to establish a real hands-on approach to learning. Brian is an expert at bringing that vision to the classroom."

Sanregret said every spring teachers work to develop lesson plans which focus on real-life situations and make "connections to the world." When planning lessons, teachers consider "rigor, relevance and relationships."

"We're really trying to use these three Rs in our decision making," he said. "Having that vision really brings clarity to what we want our school to be."

Sanregret said despite the recent reductions in state aid revenue, teaching at a high level, such as how Rajdl teaches, will continue in the Hancock schools.

"We aren't going to allow our programs to be compromised," he said. "A teacher like Brian is vital to any school. We're very fortunate to have him as a teacher here at Hancock High School."

Rajdl said besides the loss of funding for Michigan schools, many people think public education doesn't work as well as it should, but based on what he's seen while teaching the PEAK program, he disagrees with that.

"Even with declining budgets and increased mandatory minimum requirements, there's a lot of good stuff going on in the schools," he said. "One of the best quotes I got from a student was 'Now I know why we do science.'"

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