

MG21 students complete 'rite of passage' in wilderness program

By Kevin Passon kpasson@hngnews.com | Posted: Thursday, June 2, 2016 7:15 am

Seniors at MG21 were part of a pilot project this spring, taking part in a wilderness program in which the school partnered with the Ice Age Trail Alliance to create a unique outdoor experience.

“Through a partnership with the Ice Age Trail Alliance, we will become an official Saunters school,” said Rebecca Fox-Blair, teacher and executive director at the Monona Grove School District charter school. “Saunters is a youth-based program through the alliance that focuses on landscape immersion, core academic areas, experiential learning, exploration of self and volunteerism.”

Saunters programs benefit from sharing of statewide financial resources, existing curriculum and collaboration with about a dozen districts statewide. Additionally, this designation provides support from Ice Age Trail Alliance staff in customizing the outdoor experience.

During the fourth quarter of the school year, MG21 seniors were part of a wilderness skills class that focused on local service learning on the Ice Age Trail, an extended day hike in Taylor County along the trail and service learning in Taylor County.

Alyssa Hartson, the newest staff member at MG21, is the program leader.

A local to southeastern Wisconsin, she graduated from UW-Milwaukee with a degree in environmental science and a minor in biology.

After college, she began to travel the world, starting with a small piece of Alaskan wilderness. Her work and experience in Alaska allowed her to live and guide in Norway and New Zealand, as well as travel the world, exploring more than 25 countries by foot, bicycle, train and bus.

After her first season working for the U.S. Antarctic Program, she began guiding for a wilderness therapy program geared toward young adults. That enthusiasm is now on display every day at MG21.



Everybody pitches in to help

MG21 students and teachers working on the Ice Age Trail are, from left, students Kenny Heiman, Jeremiah Stewart, Corey Pope and Zami Bernal, teacher Alyssa Hartson, student Gaby Winterton, and teachers Ian Lowe, Rebecca Fox-Blair.

The students' local service learning related to prairie restoration includes core science themes and helps youths take active ownership of the local landscape. Through volunteering with a broader trail-building effort in Taylor County, participants began to connect the landscape and people along the Ice Age Trail.

Seven MG21 students made the trip to help build part of the Ice Age Trail from May 19-21.

"They put us to work right away the first day," Hartson said. "You take a piece of the forest floor and turn it into a trail. We were removing big rocks, stomping down the earth, working to ensure the rain flowed away in the right direction."

Hartson said the students completed about 200 feet of trail that first day.

Teaming up with other volunteers the second day, another 800 feet of trail were completed.

"They had to rake off 2 inches of dirt from the forest floor, and that included rocks and branches," Hartson said. "Then, they trimmed the trees hanging over the trail."

On the last day, a hike in the Chequamegon National Forest tested students physically and mentally. Hartson said the students on the hike had a better appreciation for what it takes to make such a trail.

In the forest, students did not have access to technologies such as smartphones or tablets; their only contact was with other participants and the instructors.

They were responsible for their own food and water and after their basic necessities were met, they spent time in personal reflection. Instructors asked students to reflect on their time at school, choices they've made in their lives and where they want to be as adults and what will that take. Students journaled extensively during their down time.

"This pilot will guide planning efforts as we plan the full project for the 2016-17 school year, which will be funded from a grant from the Monona Grove Education Foundation," Fox-Blair said.

This program also had a classroom piece that focused on environmental conservation, Wisconsin geography and the importance of the biodiversity. There was also be a practical field piece that focused on people's role and participation in the natural world, and wilderness survival.

"This program will function as a 'rite of passage' that every new MG21 student can look forward to and strive to accomplish," Fox-Blair said. "Participation will become a symbol for being at senior leader at MG21."