

An Uncommon Corps

Teachers and students in LaFayette team up
to add a unique hands-on lesson to new state standards

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On a recent day, the LaFayette school district's entire eighth grade drove up Interstate 81 to Onondaga Lake.

The 55 students toured the visitor center constructed by Honeywell, which is in charge of the cleanup of the polluted lake, and heard a talk by the company's local project director, John McAuliffe. Then they met with project scientists at the revitalized wetlands at Geddes Brook and Nine Mile Creek.

They then traveled to the Onondaga Historical Association in Syracuse for a talk about the history of the lakefront, had lunch at Destiny USA and returned to the lake visitor center for a talk by a scientist with the Upstate Freshwater Institute.

When they returned to LaFayette, they heard from Sid Hill, the Onondaga Nation's spiritual leader, who provided his take on what should be done with the lake, which is the Onondagas' ancestral treasure.

It was a full day, but it was only a start. The lake project is a unit of study that will occupy these students across subject areas until the end of December.

Who has time for all this when schools are booked to the hilt with tests, test preparation and a packed curriculum to meet the urgent demands of the state's new Common Core academic standards?

LaFayette Junior-Senior High School Principal Jennifer Blosser says it takes some doing, but the school is committed to the project, which is in its third year.

"It is tough with the Common Core and time out of the classroom," she said, "but it's also a relevant learning experience for our students. It utilizes what the Common Core is looking at."

David Amidon, the science teacher who organized the project, acknowledged it takes a lot of time and effort to put all the pieces of the project together. But once it's ready



Madison Coon, 13, holds a caterpillar and Melody Lacayo, 14, photographs it with her iPad during a visit by eighth-graders in LaFayette to an Onondaga Lake wetland restored by Honeywell. (Ellen M. Blalock / eblalock@syracuse.com)

to roll, it fits in seamlessly with the Common Core, which emphasizes deep research, cross-disciplinary learning and analytical thinking based on real-life issues.

Amidon, one of 35 science and math teachers in Central New York recently named "master teachers" by the state of New York, has virtually everyone involved with the eighth grade on board with the project.

"Everybody's really bought in," he said of both teachers and students. "This has been an opportunity to see something in their own backyard."

The project unites science, social studies, English and technology and even throws in

a little math.

Students work in teams of two or three to put together websites focusing on their research interests. Each team will also produce a "Prezi" — an interactive web presentation — to present their results. Each team also has the use of an iPad to take pictures, videos and notes at the places they visit and research.

Part of their research involves emailing a research question to experts Amidon has lined up at places like Syracuse University, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, the Onondaga Environmental Institute, Focus Greater Syracuse and other institu-

tions. The emails have to be written in business-letter form.

Individually, students are expected to use their research to write a persuasive essay on an issue involving the lake. And they will answer document-based questions — or DBQs — like those seen on Regents exams.

English teacher Kailee Plucknette-Kurzen, who was at the outing on the lake, said the Common Core calls for more use of non-fiction in English language arts, so she uses news articles about the lake in her class.

That fulfills Common Core expectations while keeping kids immersed in a topic that is close to home, she said.

"They're seeing that social studies or English or science is not just in that class," she said. "These content areas they are learning relate to all aspects of life."

That works for eighth-graders and project teammates Jorge Romeu and Sean Corby.

"It's good to come to the lake and to really see what's going on," said Romeu as he gazed out on the revitalized wetlands at Geddes Brook.

"Then you know how it really looks, how it really is being cleaned up instead of having a picture that shows them cleaning it up. You feel it more."

"You see what it really is as opposed to a picture," echoed Corby. "You know these things are actually there. It's probably more fun, too, than just looking it up."



Eighth-graders from LaFayette listen as John McAuliffe, director of Honeywell's cleanup efforts around Onondaga Lake, speaks during an all-day outing at the Onondaga Lake Visitors Center. (Ellen M. Blalock / eblalock@syracuse.com)