

# STUDENTS EXPERIENCE REAL LIFE LEARNING

Mike Stephenson of Pheasants Forever presented Deuel Elementary School Principal Chad Schiernbeck with a project idea for an afternoon workshop to make elementary students aware of the importance of the pheasant habitat and the benefit the habitat has to other wildlife, pollinators, and the health of the environment.

Schiernbeck's reply: "I think we should make a bigger plan than that."

Deuel had been exploring the possibility of implementing problem based learning as an instructional strategy in their school. They had done the research and discovered this type of learning embeds kids in solving problems that are real and require extensive research, processes of design and collaboration. A project like the one proposed by Stephenson would be just what the school needed to move the plan forward with a common goal.

Deuel School District joined the South Dakota Innovation Lab (SDIL), which is a collaborative group of rural schools in the state all implementing problem based learning as their instructional strategy and using resources collectively to enhance education for all students. The Deuel staff came together at a summer professional development to work out a plan for the coming school year.

The elementary staff proceeded with making a plan around the Pheasants Forever idea.

The robust Pheasants Forever project involves studying the natural habitat of a local natural area, learning about insects, mammals, pheasants, habitat, grasslands, woodlands and wetlands.

A focus of this type of work included reaching out into the community and surrounding area to find industry experts that can assist in serving as consultants in the problem solving work that is happening in classrooms. Deuel Elementary students have become partners with the City of Clear Lake and the local Pheasants Forever group, working on a 14 acre tract of land in the northeast portion of Clear Lake.

On Sept. 5, 2014, a "Kick Off Event" to get students excited about the learning that would occur in this outdoor classroom was held on a beautiful fall afternoon just a mile from the school with learning centers, park walkabouts and stations, which included professional experts from Pheasants Forever, South Dakota Game Fish and Parks and The Nature Conservancy. There were also centers focused on bees and monarch butterflies.

At the end of the afternoon, kids went away excited and ready to learn more.

After the event, the work began.

Junior Kindergarten students learn about ladybugs and have become active in the Lost Ladybug Project. Kindergarten kids discover more about the wildlife at the park and what they need to survive. In their most recent project the students are creating "Squirrel Buffer's" to help these critters out for the winter.

First grade students have become monarch conservationists and are learning lots about the food monarchs eat and their migratory patterns. The second grade team decided to tackle the many issues affecting the bee population and how they can raise awareness about the most important pollinators. Third graders have embarked on learning all about our state bird, the pheasant, and how they can help increase the pheasant numbers in the Ulven Park area and beyond.

The fourth grade crew is led by two teachers, who have a passion for plants and healthy areas for growth. Students are learning about native grasses and plants that help with wildlife and pheasants. They are also focused on the pollinating and nectaring plants at the

park.

Fifth grade kids are wetlands experts using their skills to let others know the impact that wetlands have on creating a healthy habitat for waterfowl, and also the long range affects a wetland has on the water table and the climate.

All of this learning is happening with education in mind.

Standards have been aligned to the projects and teachers are assessing student growth to guide instruction. The students can see their learning has impact beyond the classroom as their partnership with the community is strengthening the relationship between school and community.

Those bonds lead to added interest in the school, which creates pathways for kids to gather a greater understanding of what learning and living is like in our rural communities and the opportunities that will be there for them in the future.

The Pheasants Forever project in Deuel is a culturally relevant project requiring kids to dig deeper and learn more while solving a real problem.

