

Giving students options

SEEDS provides non-traditional after-school programming

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It's not often that students are given the opportunity to decide what they'd like to do at school. Most of the day is eaten up with graduation requirements, preparation for tests and learning the things they are told they will need to know.

But through the SEEDS program, students at Manistee High School are now able to decide what they'd like to learn about and, after school, can par-

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Courtesy Photo

Courtney Danks plays the guitar during a music video shoot for the original song she wrote in the SEEDS guitar club. She also edited the video as a part of the video production class.

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ticipate in everything from recycling to playing the guitar.

As an organization, MHS site coordinator Kevin Summers said SEEDS looks to accomplish several goals, a number of which are exemplified in a recycling initiative established in the program's first year at Manistee.

A green team was formed of students who wanted to establish an ecology club, and science teacher Kevin Postma signed on as advisor. The group decided to undertake a recycling project at the school, and began working with Manistee Area Public Schools food service director Kathy Gutowski on ways to reduce kitchen waste.

"We found out there were tons of these aluminum cans," Summers said, "and (the green team) said, 'yeah we'd be willing to (recycle them).' But it's a lot of work. There were maybe four or five girls and they had other things going on."

To assist in the project, Summers brought in the SEEDS Youth Conservation Corps, which signed on to help transport the recycling and both student-led groups worked with Gutowski to implement the program.

"So for us, it accomplishes a lot of what SEEDS wants to see happen," Summers said. "We've got students engaged in this kind of a social change. In a sense they're really changing the policy of a school program because now they're saving the cans, they're recycling where before they were just throwing them away. Our youth corps is engaged in that, school staff is engaged in that and then we're doing one of our missions — this ecological mission where we're decreasing the carbon footprint of the school by recycling these cans that would normally enter the waste stream."

The SEEDS program is funded through two 21st Century Community Learning Center grants from the federal Department of Education and distributed by the state Department of Education. Summers said the purpose of the grants is to create out-of-school programming to help students achieve more success during the school day.

These are fully-funded, five-year renewable grants. SEEDS is in the second year of these grants and runs 10 after-school sites in the area. Locally, there are SEEDS sites at Bear Lake and Brethren in addition to the site that started at CASMAN and moved to MHS this past fall.

Because of the grant funding, SEEDS offers students alternative after-school options, with programming directed by the participants. For the first year, Summers said they



Courtesy Photo

Manistee High School green team members (left to right) Hannah Sartor, Jenna Vincent and Kelly Schubert crush and recycle cans used in the school district's food service program.

conducted student interest surveys to find out what programs would best suit the MHS site. For next year, though, students will be invited to participate in a youth advisory council.

"It's part of the requirement of our 21st Century Community Living Center grant to have a youth voice be involved in programming decisions and things like that," Summers said. "(We're) looking at some other models in the state and nationally of some really strong and productive youth advisory councils, where youth essentially acts as a board of directors, has a voice and is involved in the budgeting and the hiring process."

This year, students had the opportunity to participate in a variety of programs, including music classes, music production, video production, culinary club, art club, photo club, the green team, dog training and creative writing.

Because of the informal structure, the programs are able to morph with the participants' interest, while finding ways to connect back to the students' academic experience.

"So you've got a kid that's disengaged from the regular school day, doesn't like the structure of school, and then chooses to participate in, for example, our creative writing class and they get really excited about writing," Summers said. "And in this case, one of the English teachers, Amanda Clemons, taught the creative writing class. So that kid maybe isn't checked in during the day gets to see this teacher in a more informal way, in a different setting. Then they can use that connection they have in the after-school program and they can bring that back and hopefully that increases their academic achievement."

This can also be accomplished through the mentoring relationships that students are able to form with the people who are teaching the after-school classes. Summers said one of the benefits of the program is the inter-generational relationships students are able to form as well as the connections with service organizations and other community activities they might not otherwise be drawn to.

Through grant funding, SEEDS is also providing a way for students to be involved in after-school activities that the school would not otherwise be able to provide.

"We're not here to supplant the school things," Summers said, "but the funding allows us to do some non-traditional things that maybe the kids wouldn't even conceptualize if we weren't here and the school may not have the resources or the connections or the time to do."

For freshman Courtney Danks, this came in the form of music and editing video. Through the music program, she learned to play guitar, wrote her own song and then made it into a music video.

"It hadn't ever occurred to me until I met Kevin and all of this started," she said of her new skills. "But I've always been interested in music and all that. Even when I was little, I would always sing and my mom and everybody would always support me singing and they would encourage me to do better."

Danks has participated in a number of the programs this year, and said it's nice to have a variety of options for after-school activities.

"During the normal school day, it's just so boring," she said, "and so it's nice to have something fun to do for once at school."