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Johnstown teachers learn project-based approach

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JOHNSTOWN - A Johnstown High School physics teacher, an alumna of the highly regarded Knowles Science Teaching Foundation, guided 15 high school and Knox Junior High School teachers through a project-based learning workshop last week.

Teacher Heather Buskirk spent the week showing 15 of her fellow teachers how they could provide better in-classroom projects for the students when school resumes in the fall.

Foundation spokeswoman Milena Perez said Buskirk is "transforming education" in her school and the entire Greater Johnstown School District through project-based learning.

According to the foundation's website, project-based learning is an instructional approach to education, where activities are designed to answer a question or solve a problem, generally reflecting the types of learning and work people do in the everyday world, outside the classroom. It teaches students communication and presentation skills, organization and time management skills, research and inquiry skills, self-assessment and reflection skills, and group participation and leadership skills.

Article Photos



The Leader-Herald/Michael Anich

Johnstown High School physics teacher Heather Buskirk, standing, assists JHS social studies teacher Heather McGuire during a Knowles Science Teaching Foundation workshop Friday at the school.

Buskirk, a St. Louis native, went through a five-year fellowship with the foundation before being able to teach the workshop, the first for Johnstown.

Buskirk, who said she has used project-based learning successfully in her own classroom, proposed the workshop to the district last spring. The week-long professional development opportunity is being funded by the district and a leadership grant from the foundation. The participants included science, social studies, English and special education teachers.

On Friday, Buskirk was leading teachers through some individualized instruction in a room next to the JHS library. "I'm facilitating the workshops, sharing my knowledge project-based learning," Buskirk said. "You imbed all the teachers in the training."

For example, she said the science teachers learn certain engineering problem-solving projects they can impart to their students. The social studies teachers may take on the role of historians, with artifacts discussed in detail in class.

She said the workshop went well last week.

"It seems people are very proud of what they've done," Buskirk said. "Everyone's been very positive."

She said the workshop also teaches the teachers how to "collaborate across different subject areas."

One of her students, JHS social studies teacher Heather McGuire, said the workshop was very beneficial.

"I've learned a lot," she said. "It's something I've been looking for - a project-based program."

Perez said that during Buskirk's five years as a fellow, she had multiple opportunities to experience project-based learning's "positive impact" on student learning. Buskirk said her goal was to pass this knowledge on to other teachers in her district and Johnstown's teachers were eager to participate. Perez said the workshop filled up within minutes of her sending out an email.

Nicole Gillespie, the foundation's senior program officer for teacher fellowships, said Buskirk is one of only 17 alumna of the foundation in the United States.

"She's a real trailblazer in this program," Gillespie said. "Our mission is to support the best and the brightest of our new teachers out there. There's a lot of exciting opportunities."

Michael Anich covers Johnstown and Fulton County news. He can be reached at johnstown@leaderherald.com.