

# ONAWAY SCHOOLS GREEN SCHOOL CERTIFIED



By **MEAGHAN GASS**  
NEMI GLSI

High school students in Onaway are integrating the environment and their local community into the classroom through their service-learning course, where they develop projects connected to their passions and interests. In this course, created by teacher Scott Steensma, student's projects are focused in five areas: animals and habitat; fisheries and water quality; plants and forestry; recycling and energy; and technology and data. These diverse place-based projects vary from year to year – sharing in common the opportunity for students to gain leadership skills through environmental stewardship projects that make a difference in their school and community.

In every student project, there is a hands-on, applied learning experience. For instance, while learning about fisheries and water quality, students raised both sturgeon and salmon in the classroom. They maintained the daily care of these fish and their tanks and completed weekly water quality tests. Both of these projects connect students to Northeast Michigan Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative (NE MI GLSI) community partners, like Sturgeon for Tomorrow and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. These groups facilitate the fish's classroom presence and release into our watersheds. The students leading these projects also



shared what they learned with younger students at their school. For example, they showed 5th graders their sturgeon, Stan, explained sturgeon anatomy, and developed worksheets to facilitate learning.

In addition to funding through the NE MI GLSI network to support the growth of this class, many local community partners – and the students themselves – contribute to the success of these projects. Students gain professional skills by fostering community partnerships and even writing grant applications to secure project funding. For instance, a former student successfully applied for a grant to fund the installation of a solar panel and wind turbine on campus. Bottle deposits from the recycling program and sales from



the greenhouse also help fund student projects. In total, since this course developed six years ago, students have raised nearly \$70,000 to support their projects.

While supporting the local community and environment, many of these projects also have a direct benefit to Onaway Schools. For instance, from the recycling program less trash pickups are required weekly, and as a result, Onaway Schools save about \$2,000 per year. This project also connects students to the school's superintendent, who drives the trailer of recyclables with the students to the Emmet County Transfer Station.

They recycle about 2,000 pounds every six weeks with a total of 12,000 lbs. recycled during the 2014-15 school year. Through these student-led projects, Onaway Schools serves as a recycling and renewable energy demonstration site - a model of sustainability within their own community.

Students are also beautifying their campus while creating environmental education opportunities. They have installed aquariums in various locations, and there is also a freshwater tank displaying Great Lakes ecosystems, which showcases wildlife and connects students to our local watersheds. They are planting trees and managing their schoolyard forest, enhancing local wildlife habitat. Students also celebrate each other's projects on campus with display boards throughout the school, as well as the presentations they share with younger students. These displays showcase the students' work and allow students outside of the service-learning course to learn about these exciting projects.

Onaway students also collaborate directly with the NE MI GLSI through projects connecting schools from different counties in Northeast Michigan. In April, Onaway Schools were able to participate in the Northeast Michigan Earth Day Bag Project. This Alpena-



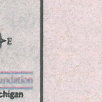
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based project has students decorating paper grocery bags with messages about the 3Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle) and the environment to raise awareness about the dangers of single-use plastics, like grocery bags. Thanks to the hard work of two high school students, the project was expanded to Onaway and 900 students were engaged in both Alpena and Onaway this past year.

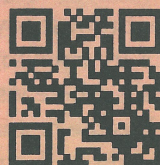
In general, these students are improving their school, community, and environment through this service-learning course. They gain connections to other community members and have a hands-on learning experience. It is a great reflection of place-based education, which integrates the

environment and local community into the curriculum. Through this student leadership, it is no surprise that Onaway Schools has achieved the highest standard and certification as a Michigan Green School! 🌱

The NE MI GLSI network can take pride in the work of these students and their teacher, Scott Steensma, for their partnerships and leadership in place-based stewardship education. We look forward to the upcoming school year and a new cohort of students to develop more of these amazing projects.

For more information visit  
[www.NEMIGLSI.org](http://www.NEMIGLSI.org)

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