



Shaler Area teacher prepares for research trip to Antarctica

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Students at Shaler Area Elementary School are trying on extreme cold weather gear, tracking South Pole temperatures, and conducting a countdown for teacher Michael Penn, who will be leaving in November for a research trip to Antarctica.

Mr. Penn, STEAM coordinator and teacher at the elementary school, is participating in PolarTREC (Teachers and Researchers Exploring and Collaborating), a program through which middle and high school teachers and university academics conduct polar science research together.

He will work with researchers from the University of Wisconsin to

Pole stations, and fly to remote locations to work on the machines, which provide useful data for climate-change research.

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Mr. Penn, of Economy, Beaver County, hopes the trip will make science more approachable for his students.

“It makes me a better teacher, and it makes me better able to communicate science to the kids,” said Mr. Penn, who has taught at Shaler for 27 years. “Hopefully, they can look at me and see, ‘If he can do that, I can be a scientist, too.’”

The trip is already bringing science to life at Shaler. Students are using GPS data to find Antarctic weather stations, whose precise locations move due to glacial shifts.

The school also received a grant for its own weather station, so students can compare temperatures in Shaler and Antarctica. While Mr. Penn is away, students will broadcast his locations and weather conditions on the school’s television news station.

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In addition to trying on the gear, students have posed interesting questions, wondering what people eat in Antarctica and how they go to the bathroom in such cold weather.

Lori Robinet Mish, an assistant principal at Shaler, said that she is most excited about what the trip can teach about problem-solving.

“What we want the kids to learn and gain aside from all of the factual stuff about Antarctica ... is perseverance and resiliency,” Ms. Mish said.

She said she hopes that Mr. Penn uses his travels to develop new “missions” for the school’s spaceship simulator, IKS Titan. Mr. Penn runs this program, through which students use technology and teamwork to try to solve difficult interdisciplinary problems.

Mr. Penn said that the entire PolarTREC application process has helped students learn about tenacity and problem-solving. He didn’t get selected the first time he applied, so he had his students help him revise the application and he became one of 11 U.S. teachers chosen.

His background makes him a natural for the program. A self-proclaimed “weather geek” with a deep interest in exploration, he also has served in the Army and as a Scoutmaster for the Boy Scouts.

Mr. Penn went on a training trip in Alaska in March, and has been working with researchers from Wisconsin to get up to speed on the

science.

“I can’t be any more excited,” Penn said. “I’m just tickled that they’ve chosen me to go.”

Correction, posted Saturday, Oct. 6, 2018: A previous version of this story misspelled “Antarctica” in the headline.

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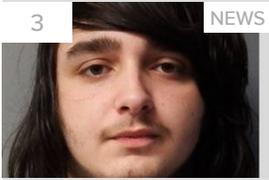
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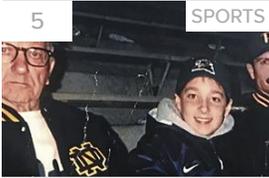
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