

Rural School District Uses Hunting Curriculum to Teach Gun Safety

By **The Associated Press**

November 19, 2018

New Underwood, S.D.

It's football playoff day at New Underwood.

High schoolers are wearing purple and white football jerseys and cheerleader outfits in a computer lab, but down the hallway in Stacy Finkbeiner's sixth-grade physical education classroom, it's all business as a student in back sets down his blaze orange cap and takes out a pencil as the hunting exam is passed back to him.

"I don't turn 12 for three days," said one student. "Does that mean I have to take the test again?"

Chad Tussing, director of the Outdoor Campus West, school board member at New Underwood School District, and parent of one of the sixth-graders in Finkbeiner's classroom, responded, "Yours will have something special written on it, but you'll be good to go when you turn 12."

He fist pumps in the air. Eagerness to join moms and dads, older siblings and grandparents in the pheasant fields of South Dakota is common for students here.

Less common is a school-sponsored hunting program, but this fall in New Underwood, a quiet, farming and ranch town on the grassy rangeland east of Rapid City, sixth- through eighth-graders in the physical education classroom have all taken—and passed—the new hunting curriculum, sponsored by the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish & Parks.

Children between the ages of 12 and 16 who wish to hunt need to pass the HuntSAFE program, which includes instruction on properly walking rows, crossing fences and handling a rifle, the Rapid City Journal reported. The New Underwood School District, responding in part to the decline of hunting nationally, decided to pass on to students the heritage of hunting. The recent written exam culminated a two-week curriculum.

"I've liked not going to music for two weeks," Kale Crowser, 12, said with a smile. He said his father has taken him hunting, but learning gun safety is a "good life skill."

"Everyone took it pretty seriously, too," Crowser said.

Around Finkbeiner's classroom—he also serves as the middle school math teacher and coach for both track and the high school girls' basketball team at this school district with 237 students K-12—children diligently took the test.

Questions ask about the danger of a .22 bullet at various distances and when should loading of the firearm happen prior to hunting (one seemingly obvious diversion answer is "when you get into your car").

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Chad Tussing, Outdoor Campus West director, answers a question from Cassie Chambliss, 12, during a hunter safety course at New Underwood School.

—Ryan Hermens/Rapid City Journal via AP

In the field settings, the students don't use live guns but non-firing guns specially made by the manufacturer. They feel like rifles, open and close like them, but have no bullets. On one day, the students even used Nerf guns in a field.

"We had parental permission slips and during parent-teacher conferences everyone was very positive," said Finkbeiner. "We're a very rural, farm community. Even if kids don't want to hunt, there's a chance they'll someday encounter guns. We just want them to have knowledge about how to stay safe."

One sixth-grader, Jessica Caspers, wears a jacket won from a barrel-racing competition in Rapid City. She said her dad has taken her hunting, but she felt more prepared after the two-week course.

"You hold the gun like this," she said, grabbing the invisible gun close to her chest, "when you fall down and you're supposed to move very slowly."

Hunting in South Dakota is big business. South Dakota GF&P estimates \$680 million is generated annually from hunting alone. But national trends, said Tussing, suggest as baby boomers age fewer hunters are stepping in to fill their shoes. A 2017 study from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service showed a decline of 2 million hunters between 2011 and 2016.

"That can mean less funding for wildlife management and to the agencies," Tussing said. "So, we've tried to expand out to other groups."

New Underwood School District is the third school in the state along with districts in Lyman County and Winner to embed hunter safety into the curriculum. Just recently, sixth-graders at Douglas School District in Box Elder began taking hunter-safety classes.

Previously, when Tussing held HuntSAFE trainings in New Underwood—a town of 660—approximately six or seven students signed up. But this year between the sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders, there are 52 new young people in town with safety permits.

"There are a lot of guns around," Crowser said. "So you might as well learn how to use them."

Finkbeiner, a 30-year teacher who hunts pheasants and deer, said he sees his physical education classroom as a space for learning lifelong activities. "We could take them kayaking or fishing next. It's silly not to take advantage of the opportunities we have living out here."

As the students handed in their exams and waited quietly while others finished, a student in a Captain America T-shirt—Gage Garrett, 11—grabbed a copy of a glossy magazine called "Hunter's Handbook" and sat back down at his desk to read. On the cover is embossed "Ensuing the Future of Our Hunting Heritage" with a father and son in blaze orange standing in tall grass, pointing into the distance.

"Kids used to do this growing up," Superintendent George Seiler said. "But they don't as much anymore. So, we just wanted this collaborative effort to teach gun safety. You may never hunt, but it's a good idea to be familiar with this component, as it's kind of a way of life here."

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