

Trout project teaches Menallen students about nature

By [Marilyn Forbes](#), FOR THE DAILY COURIER
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Teacher Stephanie Dean

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Checking the water

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Recoding fish data

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About the writer

Marilyn Forbes can be reached at 724-626-3530 or via [e-mail](#).

The fourth-grade students at Menallen Elementary School in the Uniontown School District are learning firsthand about nature.

Menallen is participating in a Trout in the Classroom project that allows the students to help raise Brown trout.

Offered through a partnership of the state Fish and Boat Commission and Pennsylvania Trout Unlimited, the program's popularity is spreading throughout the region.

"We started last year with the vo-tech (Fayette Area Vocational Technical School), and now we have five schools," said James Tobal, chairman of the Youth Fishing Committee Trout in the Classroom project. "It's really taken off."

Joining Menallen and the vocational school are Hutchinson, Turkeyfoot and Geibel Catholic.

Participating schools need to match a \$500 start-up fee from Trout Unlimited, to purchase equipment to start the project.

At the beginning of the school year, hundreds of trout eggs are delivered to the schools which then take over, nurturing and caring for their new classroom additions.

When Menallen Principal Charles Yasechko heard of the project, he thought that it would be a perfect fit for the direction that his science department was going in.

"I'm an outdoorsy guy myself," Yasechko said, "and I've always been in tune to environmental concerns. We are a Title 1 school, and we have a theme every year. I suggested to my staff to pick any kind of environmental projects that we could then incorporate into their classes. Mr. Tobal approached me about this project and described it, and we thought that it would be a good fit."

Science teacher Stephanie Dean then volunteered to take on the project for her fourth-grade classes.

"My father (Jerry Petrucci) works at the vo-tech, and he told me that it was a fantastic project," Dean said. "I thought it sounded interesting, so I thought we could try it."

With the help of the school's PTO, the school got the funding in place to purchase the needed equipment. At the beginning of October, almost 400 Brook trout eggs found a new home in Dean's classroom.

"I was really nervous at first," Dean said, "you have to be so careful with the eggs. I would check them on a regular basis and any that had turned white (died), I removed."

The eggs were kept in a breeding basket until they hatched, then the minute trout, or "fry" would start their journey that eventually will land them in a local stream.

It is the students' responsibility to not only feed the trout, but to observe and record the life cycle stages, learn about environmental conditions and check and monitor water PH levels on a daily basis.

"This is not only about science, but it also incorporates math, writing and reading," Tobal said. "It's a wonderful overall learning experience for the students."

It's also fun.

"The students are so excited every day to see the trout and check them," Dean said, adding that each student works with the water and the fish, then records the data in a journal. "They absolutely love this."

The fry must be watched closely.

"The water temperature has to remain cold," Dean said. "That is something we have to watch constantly. It has to remain between 48 to 52 degrees."

Kept in a 55-gallon tank, Dean presently has about 150 trout, all around one half to one inch in length.

"She is doing an outstanding job here," Tobal said. "It's incredible that she has this many trout at this point. Trout Unlimited expects maybe 30 to 35 fish from these projects."

Menallen will continue with the project in the future and is also in the process of completing its outdoor environmental area, which consists of turning an outdoor courtyard into a learning and fitness area.

Since the premise of the trout project is to educate the students while also helping to refurbish our local streams, the trout will be placed in streams in late spring when they have reached the fingerling stage.

"We're in the process of arranging a field trip for the students to take the fingerlings to a local creek, possibly Dunbar creek," Yasechko said.

"I'll be both happy and sad," fourth-grade student Caitlin Mitchell said. "I'll be sad to see them go, but I'll be happy to see them set free in the wild."