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Robotics are 'cool' at Oak View Middle School in Andover



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Paul Keeney's Design and Manufacturing class

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ANDOVER, Minn. -- Students gather around a billiard-sized table in Paul Keeney's Design and Manufacturing class at Oak View Middle School in Andover.

"Start line, touch the wall, follow the line, don't touch the wall, go to the free zone, end of the finish line, that's your final test," shouts Keeney as he informs them of the rules for what he calls "The Grand Challenge."

It doesn't sound easy, and it's not as students huddle over laptops trying to program their Lego robots to complete the desired course.

"We want to make the robot follow the line on the table," says 8th grader Angela Stenglein.

That's the same table the students were gathered around. It has raised sides, and a course plotted out with a few obstacles in the way. If all goes well, the robots will plod along the black line, stopping there they are supposed to, and turning on command.

But it doesn't always go as planned.

"Yeah, like the other day, we spent, like the whole class trying to figure out what wouldn't work, and it was a wheel (that was) unplugged," says 8th grader Bailey Krebsbach.

Keeney wants his students to run into problems, so they will learn how to solve problems. Themselves.

"They're used to coming to a teacher to say, 'help me solve the problem.' But what they really mean is 'solve the problem for me,'" says Keeney.

While the robotics portion of the course teaches skills that can be applied across the board, Keeney is hoping his students will get the bug for technology.

He coaches the Robotics Team, as well as a team of students that

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entered a vehicle in the Supermileage Challenge in Brainerd, a competition that mainly attracts high school students.

Eighth grader Dean Heitland is hooked.

"NASA actually uses this kind of stuff to experiment on the robots they build, the rovers, all that stuff," says Heitland.

Whether students go on to become members of the Robotics Team isn't Keeney's test of success for his class.

He measures student interest in another way.

"Last year I had students programming the Grand Challenge on the last day of school. And they didn't sit here and just shut down and have a party," says Keeney. "They were in there programming and trying to tweak the robot and trying to get it to be even better than it was the day before."

To see Keeney's students and their robots in action, click on the video link to the right.

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