

Unique CMJH German class earns national recognition

[CAROL MCGRAW](#)

2013-01-11 23:23:58



Wir sind nummer eins!

That's how students describe the national award that Cheyenne Mountain Junior High School's German language program just won.

It means: We are number one.

The program received the German Center of Excellence designation by the American Association of Teachers of German. It's the only K-8 school in the country to receive the honor. The other four winners are high schools.

"Oh my gosh, it's a huge honor," said Bev Tarpley, D-12 assistant superintendent. She noted there are many German programs nationwide, including hundreds of German immersion programs that

they surpassed for the honor.

She praised instructor Michael Miller. "For middle school, you have to make it fun as well as relevant. We have an outstanding teacher, and the students love him."

On Friday, Miller stood outside his classroom door greeting students in German and shaking hands as they entered. It's a German school ritual, he said.

Stepping into his classroom is no excruciating hour of conjugating verbs or repeating mind-numbing vocabulary drills. Miller has created a unique curriculum that is being used by German teachers nationwide. There are his workbooks, but no traditional textbooks.

The class is like being in the middle of a theater production with Miller and students interacting in lively conversation with much drama and comedy thrown in. Miller moves the class a mile a minute so there is no time to for the kids to get flustered, stuck, self-conscious or bored.

He uses a sort of elaborate sign language to mimic phrases, and asks personalized questions to spur the discussion.

"It's storytelling and talking, just like mothers teach their kids how to speak. They don't hand the kids a grammar book," Miller says. "It's an obvious way to learn language and most instructors don't do it, opting for traditional methods."

Miller loves the language partly because his maternal great-great-grandparents came here during the German migration of the 1800s. He started in Cheyenne Mountain School District 12 20 years ago with a handful of students. The program has grown to 100 students in five classes. In the mid-1990s, he embraced techniques of the grass-roots program called Teaching Proficiency Through Reading and Storytelling. There were no German curriculums so he created one that has evolved and is available online for other teachers.

Keith Cothrun, executive director of the association, said in a letter that Miller's curriculum is "most impressive." He praises the fact that the class respects diverse learning styles, that materials are culturally authentic and that there is much rapport with students and extracurricular activities that take the language beyond the classroom.

The award comes with a \$500 check, which Miller said he is going to use to buy classroom items.

Miller starts the class by reading a funny German potty training story for toddlers that involves goats and horses and sheep. His students, some lounging on big floor pillows, are in stitches. Every so often, an authentic cuckoo clock on the wall sounds off.

The seventh- and eighth-graders have studied German less than six months and are fluent. The junior high students have done well on the high school level national German exam.

While many schools have concentrated on Chinese, Arabic and Spanish in recent years, German remains important because so much English is based on it. It's been popular in Colorado Springs because many military personnel served there and speak it, and many have German spouses.

"I love this class," says Victoria Kearns, 13. "It's my favorite all day. My sister took Spanish, and this is much more interactive."

She took the class because her parents had been stationed in Germany. "I just knew a few words because they would use German when they wanted us to do things, like hurry up."

Avory Vose, who speaks Korean and English, wants to be trilingual.

"My grandfather told me if I took a third language the others would come much easier. He speaks Chinese, Japanese, German, French, English and Spanish and Polish."

Miller set up an email penpal and exchange program with schools and students in Germany. Some of the kids have written to and received replies from German rock bands such as Oomph and Tokio Hotel.

The students gather at lunch to use their German while watching movies, playing board games and trying new German recipes in the adjacent kitchen that was once a lab. They also participate in an after-school foreign language club. Because so many students take the class, Cheyenne Mountain High School's German program has grown, with two full-time teachers.

The junior high students are regulars at nearby Edelweiss Restaurant. "They told us that they get some high school groups," Miller said. "But they don't speak German during dinner like our classes do."

Parker Hoover, 12, said he took the class to be different. A lot of his friends took Spanish and French. "I'm glad I did. It's a lot of fun and has a lot of action."