

Gateway to Growth: St. Louis Adventure

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Eighth graders in a suburban junior high school plan with teachers and parents on exploration of the historical downtown areas of their own city. A comprehensive structure helped to make this a satisfying curricular experience for students and teachers alike.

During the 1977 spring semester, a group of educators from East Ladue Junior High School developed and successfully implemented "St. Louis Adventure," a challenging and provocative learning experience for eighth graders. East Ladue Junior High School is located ten miles west of downtown St. Louis in suburban Ladue, a community that is almost completely residential and comprises primarily business and professional people. Although the program was specifically adapted for East Ladue Junior High School, Project Adventure (Hamilton-Wenham Regional School District, Hamilton, Massachusetts)¹—a curricular approach that combines Outward Bound, group process activities, and academic learning—served as the model.

St. Louis Adventure was a success for a variety of reasons: (a) it made learning exciting for students; (b) it helped to develop student con-

¹For more information about Project Adventure, write Robert Lentz, Director, 775 Bay Road, Hamilton, Massachusetts 01936.

fidence and competence in making practical use of basic skills being taught in the classroom; (c) it provided an excellent opportunity to use community resources effectively; (d) it received the support and cooperation of the students' parents, involving many in active roles as the project was planned and implemented; and (e) it served as an incentive to the teachers as they reflect on the total school program and its genuine learning value for the students.

Why a St. Louis Adventure?

Because of their insulation in suburbia, many of our students perceived the city in negative and often incorrect ways. Impressed by the write-up of Project Adventure's urban experience in Boston,¹ we wanted to offer our students the opportunity to learn from historically and culturally rich St. Louis. Through a combination of classroom activities and student-planned explorations within the city, we were able to develop more positive student attitudes regarding life in the central city.

How Was It Developed and Implemented?

First, we compiled a formal list of objectives. Then we began to meet with small groups of teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents to share our thoughts and listen to their ideas. After each of the three eighth-grade social studies teachers had chosen one of her classes to participate in piloting the adventure, we decided to send these classes, in groups of four to six, to the city on separate days.

Selection of Neighborhoods

We selected four neighborhoods for exploration. We had visited these neighborhoods to be sure (a) that they contained some common elements that student groups might later compare or contrast; (b) that each area could be geographically delineated and explored in a single day; (c) that we had several persons in each who would be receptive to contacts by students; (d) that the neighborhood offered sufficient diversity; (e) that it would not be one to arouse parental anxiety; and (f) that the area was accessible by public

Students in the downtown area hurry to be on time for an appointment at the phone company.





Students plan for their St. Louis Adventure.

transportation since we felt it important for students to take advantage of this service with which most were totally unfamiliar. Using public transportation would not only extend their geographical horizons, it would also give them practical application of map and chart reading skills taught in the classroom.

Parent Involvement in Planning

Our next step was to send home parent permission slips that outlined the plan and invited parents to an informational meeting about the project. Both parents and students supported the plan, although the students also expressed cautious curiosity with regard to the actual trip into the city.

Work-Packet and Other Preparatory Activities for Students

The students in the chosen classes completed a work-packet on St. Louis history, and responded to an opinionnaire and an open-ended questionnaire designed to check general knowledge about urbanization and feelings about city life. They viewed a filmstrip on the role of the city in the history of civilization. Then they participated in a "discovery" lesson in which they studied pictures and slides of old St. Louis (1850-1930) and made inferences about city life in St. Louis in those years.

In another lesson, they reacted to a list of generalizations about cities and formulated ques-



Waiting for the bus was a part of the adventure for every group.

tions they might ask or observations they might make to gather evidence to support or disprove various hypotheses. We initiated a lesson and discussion on poverty and slums and the outward movement of city populations. An art specialist in the district increased interest in one of the focal areas by describing his personal experiences in that area in the 1950s and giving a slide presentation showing its distinctive architecture and ironwork. To stimulate interest in the downtown area, the students read a brochure from the Visitors' Bureau on places of interest and designed a walking tour for an imaginary visitor, marking the route on a map of the downtown area.

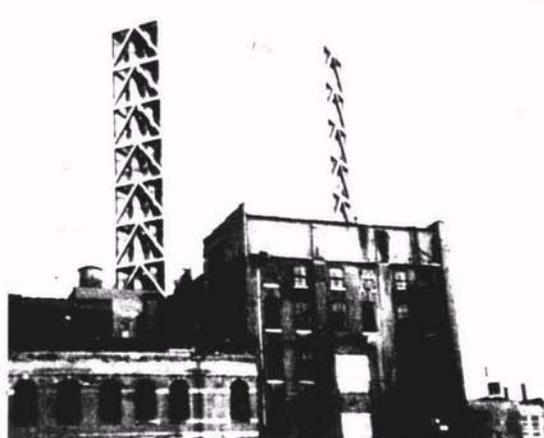
At last we were ready for the crucial step of presenting the four selected areas to the class. Their first direct challenge, to pick which area of the city they would explore, followed the teachers' description of each of the four areas. Students studied our information and took notes that they later turned in with their first, second, and third choices of area. In composing the groups, the teachers made sure that each student got either his/her first or second choice and tried to distribute student leadership among all groups. Students who might have a personality clash were separated.

Plans and Preparation by Students for City Visits

After forming groups, now identified by the name of the area they would explore, all students and teachers turned to the problem of developing those special skills that they would need in order



Nancy Brown checks with her group in the Soulard area.



Urban contrasts as perceived by the students in the downtown area.

to survive in "the big city." Most of these activities were done within the groups so that, in addition to learning to work together, they experienced the advantages of dividing and allocating specific tasks. Provided with a large map of St. Louis, they located various landmarks and thoroughfares in the designated areas. They drew and labeled maps of the neighborhoods they would traverse. During one class period, they learned to read bus schedules in order to plan exactly when and where to catch the bus and make proper transfers, if necessary. Now the groups began to focus in on their own specific adventures.

Since one of our goals was to challenge students to accept the risks of decision-making as they shared the responsibility for planning, student groups began to design their own adventure by drawing up a tentative itinerary. Each group member was then expected to make at least one outside contact, recording the location of the facility, the person with whom he/she spoke, and the results of the contact.

From this tentative plan (which sometimes anticipated ten or twelve stops in one day) and the results of their inquiries, they drew up a more realistic itinerary, including times, locations, and any associated expenses, such as lunch and bus fares. By having each individual turn in a "Summary of Activities," we monitored group interaction. Varied financial resources among our students forced us to intervene when a particular group selected one of the most expensive restaurants in downtown St. Louis for lunch, although

for the most part, the members of the groups worked out their own solutions to such problems as they arose.

Even though each student took part in the planning, the work load often did not seem even. "It seemed like I was doing everything," wrote Lori in her journal. "While they were talking, I was planning the whole thing." But enthusiasm and efficiency built. "We got a lot of calls completed today," Traci recorded. "We organized bus routes and got all the times and reservations for the places we are going. Now all we have to do is get the order in which we are going to do things. Each day it gets more and more exciting."

Classroom Exercises To Sharpen Skills

Although in the classroom most of the students felt secure regarding the interviews with people in the city, we anticipated this would be a problem on the trip. Two of our teachers made an instructional tape for the students that included a sample interview. In small groups, the students prepared for the next day's lesson—to role-play interviews with such people as an office worker, a bus driver, a professional person, and a storekeeper. The students enjoyed this role-playing and added questions to their lists as they listened and criticized each other's interviews. After instructions from a district media resource person, the students prepared to depart on their adventure, equipped with specific interview questions, notepads, tape recorders, and cameras.

Ready To Go at Last!

On each of the adventure days, equipment and last-minute good luck wishes were given to the students as they waited to leave from the bus stop across from the school, and we could not help but share in their excitement. The air seemed filled with the spirit of adventure; we clearly recognized the same sense of self-confidence that the students had expressed the day before in one classroom. In response to the question, "Do you feel ready?" each one had answered with a grinning, affirmative reply, and we knew that personal growth had taken place. They *were* ready.

The various groups departed from a nearby bus stop, accompanied by a parent- or teacher-observer (whose job it was to provide input only in case of emergency) anywhere between 8:07 and 8:50 a.m. One group from each class had chosen the downtown area, and a composite of their itineraries included visits to the telephone company, the baseball stadium, an old cathedral, and the first federal courthouse west of the Mississippi. They spoke with many people, including the manager of Kiel Auditorium, who described how federal funds were used in building this convention hall during the Depression, and a National Park Service Ranger at the courthouse who encouraged them to ascend the judicial dais in the main courtroom. These two certainly helped fulfill our objective of making history real to our students.

Unique Visits—People and Places

Other students visited "The Hill," an outstandingly cohesive Italian community in St. Louis, where they spoke with the local priest and several small businessmen who serve the specialized needs of that ethnic group. Students who explored the Souard area, an example of an economically poor but culturally wealthy neighborhood, spoke with friendly residents as well as church and school people. They also had their first introduction to the importance of the beer industry to St. Louis via a tour through the Busch Brewery. Those who chose the Central West End, the bustling midtown residential and public service district, entered for the first time the world of medical and pharmaceutical schools, the local

educational television station, and a small private school where they "rapped with kids their own age." The teachers spent the day driving around the city in their cars in order to be in touch with each group sometime during the day.

Frustrations and Successes

Although some students had experienced minor frustrations along the way, the enthusiasm at the end of each adventure day was unanimous. With the help of parents, we provided potluck dinners at homes afterwards, and as each tired group appeared there were shouts of "Wait till you hear what we did!" and "Our adventure was the best!" After they settled down, we all did some serious reflection on their experiences. They were eager to share not only what they had done and seen, but how they felt about the whole day.

Follow Up

The next morning, still enjoying their residual enthusiasm, they attacked the long list of follow-up responsibilities. Because students were concerned with the problems they had encountered on the buses, we contacted the public service company, which later sent a representative to answer students' complaints. The pupils listed persons who had helped in various ways, and followed through with handwritten thank-you notes. Next, they were retested, using the same instruments we had used before the St. Louis adventure. Some of the longer range follow-ups included a decision by one group to collect toys for a retarded children's school they had visited; others organized their materials in order to make "adventure" presentations to other classes and to parents at an upcoming open house. In class, they discussed elements that these experiences had in common. For example, after different students reported on what they had seen in a small private school, a Catholic school, and a Lutheran church school, they compared these with their own experiences in a public school. They then followed up with an essay assignment on "What is education?" As teachers, we felt that there were many other kinds of questions we might ask although we could not escape the most common classroom syndrome of all—lack of time!

Future Plans

What will be different about the next St. Louis Adventure? We'd like to make the unit more interdisciplinary, to involve science, math, language arts, and art teachers. Career education may be incorporated in a more direct way. More areas of the city need to be explored in order to accommodate more students, although we recognize that this may necessitate limiting the amount of student input into the planning. The role of the adult "observer" could offer more than we originally anticipated. In all probability, professionals will be used in that capacity to enhance student awareness of their surroundings. The evaluative instruments need to be improved to provide more concrete goal measures. Generally, however, St. Louis Adventure will go on in much the same form as it originated.

This program provided a new stimulus to learning for almost all those involved in it. Indeed, we concluded, the doors of St. Louis opened the lives not only of students, but of the faculty and the community. Everyone learned something from the Adventure experience!

Goals of St. Louis Adventure

- To extend the learning situation from the familiar environment of the classroom to an unfamiliar setting where the students will have to apply already learned skills in a new situation.
- To provide students with materials and exercises which will allow them to participate in the selection of learning goals.
- To challenge students to accept the risks involved in decision-making and to make commitments necessary to carry out their own decisions.
- To structure activities where the likelihood of success is high and where failure does not mean getting a poor grade, but means rather a place from which to begin again.
- To provide an opportunity for students to recognize the interrelationship between our nation's history and the history and growth patterns of the City of St. Louis.
- To allow students to recognize through firsthand experiences the complexity and variety of city neighborhoods, and to teach them to be

aware of ethnic, economic, political, and geographic distinctions.

- To develop an awareness of the people who live in the city as individuals with unique lives, concerns, hopes, and dreams, through the medium of interviewing.

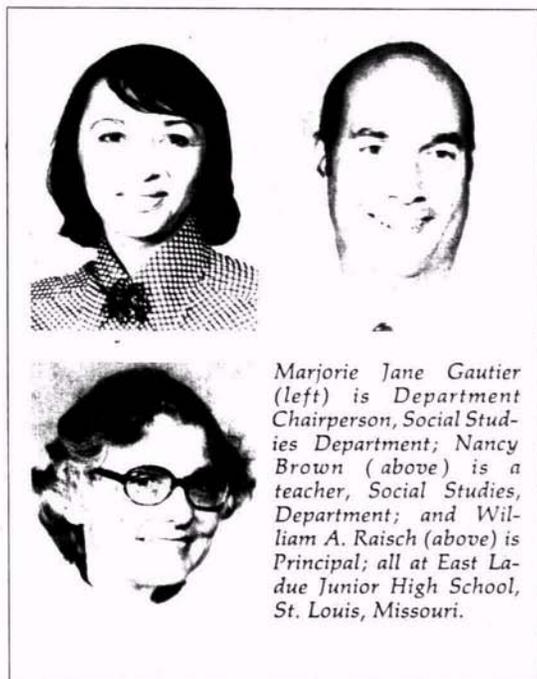
- To help the student gain, from the sharing of the neighborhood experience of each group, a composite view of the city as a varied, dynamic place.

- To involve parents and community members in an educational process by asking them to assist on the trip, and to suggest people and places to visit in St. Louis.

- To provide students with a small group experience that involves shared responsibility for each other, interviewing, scheduling, and finding their way through the city together.

- To require students to list and discuss some of the positive as well as negative prospects of the city.

- To provide an opportunity for students to review their experiences, evaluate them, and then express their own feelings and opinions. *Fl*



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