Community-based Learning in the Secondary School

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Students in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, are leaving the school to spend as much as a full semester learning about the adult world.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, first stirred to life at the point where the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers join to form the Ohio. It is an industrial city; the landscape along the rivers is dominated by the steel mills for which the area is known. The steel mills drew immigrants to western Pennsylvania from throughout Europe, and Allegheny County today remains rich in its ethnic diversity and cultural heritage.

Pittsburgh is also the headquarters of many major corporations, a center of higher education, and a leader in urban restoration and historic preservation. There is much civic pride among Pittsburghers. It is a big small town, a friendly place, warmly regarded by natives and newcomers alike as "someplace special," a label fondly applied to the city by a local radio station.

However special Pittsburgh may be, in at least one respect it is very much like most other metropolitan areas in the United States. Throughout the city and in the hills and valleys of the smaller towns and suburban communities that surround it, thousands of young people proceed through days of high school classes that are simi-

fines of the classroom. They had been particularly impressed by James S. Coleman's *Youth: Transition to Adulthood,*[1] a study of the evolving role of youth in America. Coleman noted that the age segregation of youth in the schools deprives young people of an important dimension of the socialization process: learning through direct association with adults not only skills and information, but values, responsibility, and a sense of belonging in the adult world.

Senior Semester

What resulted from the concern of the educators in McKeesport and the generosity of the Mellon Foundation was a community-based learning program called the Senior Semester. It was offered as an elective, for credit, to senior students who were not enrolled in vocational or business programs (for which there were already community-based experiences in the curriculum). The program flourished for four years, serving about 100 students annually, and was the model for the now nearly a dozen community-based learning programs in Allegheny County.

How the Programs Work

These programs are similar in intent, and to some extent in format, to programs described as experiential learning, field experience education, action learning, and walkabout that have mushroomed around the country in recent years. Students in the semester-long programs usually receive credit equivalent to that received for an average course load during a semester. They spend each day in the community with adults, observing and participating in their work. Most students have two placements during the semester. (Changing placements diversifies the learning experience and helps students avoid becoming involved in routine work.)

As community-based learning has evolved in Allegheny County, "community" has come to mean the entire county. The Allegheny Intermed-

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lar in content and setting to those in high schools across the nation.

In their isolation from the rest of the community, students spend their days with each other and their teachers. There is little that reflects the wealth and diversity of life beyond the doors of the high school. Contact with adults in the community, except for their parents and relatives, is for most of them peripheral and incidental, as is the case for most American teenagers.

Since 1973, however, there has been an effort in a steadily increasing number of school districts in Allegheny County to offer an alternative to the isolation of the high schools from the larger community. Hundreds of high school students have been given opportunities to become active participants in the lives and work of adults in their communities. The change began with a grant from the Richard King Mellon Foundation and the concern of administrators and faculty in the school district of McKeesport, a mill town several miles up the Monongahela River from Pittsburgh.

Both the foundation and the school district recognized that schools were unable to provide many significant life experiences within the con-

[1] James S. Coleman, *et al. Youth: Transition to Adulthood.* Report of the Panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.

iate Unit (AIU), the liaison agency between the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the county school districts, has developed a computer bank of placement sites for the districts with community-based learning programs. The AIU also offers evaluation services and inservice programs to the participating districts.

Student placements can be as varied as the careers of adults in the community. In Allegheny County they include veterinarians, botanists, attorneys, florists, police chiefs, media specialists, physicians, librarians, arts administrators, and corporate executives. Students gain a view of adult life, not in the abstract, but in the work place where decisions and conflicts are inherent to the daily routine. Whether that work place is an oak-paneled office or a damp greenhouse seems not to matter. What does matter very much is that the young person is learning in an environment of his or her own choosing with the guidance of supportive adults.

Students commonly elect community-based learning programs for one or both of two reasons: to get some firsthand career information or to get out of school. The result of participation in community-based learning, however, is almost universally something more. The students gain a new and often surprising sense of what it means to be an adult, a phenomenon that occurs rarely, if at all, in the classroom.

In the Mellon Foundation-supported evaluation of Senior Semester for each of the first two years of the program, the University of Pittsburgh surveyed the participating students and their parents and placement supervisors. The findings showed that the students felt and demonstrated increased value for education, greater desire and capacity to accept responsibility, and higher regard for the demands of adult life. They also became more aware of the choices open to them upon leaving the sheltered environment of the high school.

Planning

Like other programs that seem to offer a simple formula for success, a community-based learning program requires careful planning strategies and integration of the program into the existing curriculum. It is not possible to describe in a brief article all of the important concerns that arise in the planning of such a program, but the experiences in Allegheny County have generated some general and practical guidelines for program development.

Initially, a school district should *seek support in the community* before adding a community-based component to the academic curriculum. This can be done through correspondence and personal contacts with representatives of local business, institutions, and community service groups, along with parents who have demonstrated interest in the high school and with student leaders.

At the same time, the school district should determine through the state office of education what accommodations can be made for community-based learning students to ensure their *fulfill-*

ment of state mandated credit requirements. In some of the Allegheny County programs, for example, students return to school one afternoon a week to take English and physical education.

When preliminary support for the concept of community-based learning has been obtained, the school district should *identify an individual to take responsibility* for additional groundwork. That individual may well be a counselor or teacher interested in the concept who may be released from part of his or her regular assignment to develop the community-based learning program.

By the time the program is presented to the school and community, there should be a clear *design for planning, supervising, and evaluating* each student's participation in the program. In the Allegheny County programs extensive records are maintained for each student including a placement preference form, an agreement completed with the placement supervisor, attendance records, and regular evaluation statements from the student, the program coordinator, and the placement supervisor.

Curriculum should be developed to support and enrich the students' community-based learning. In Senior Semester, students were required to attend weekly seminars on such topics as confidentiality, stereotyping, goal setting, decision making, and productivity. The seminar curriculum included group and individual activities, discussion guidelines, and weekly assignments in which the students applied their understanding of a particular concept or topic to their placement experiences. Several of the Allegheny County programs incorporate such a seminar.

Students should be required to keep a *journal as a record of their daily activities.* The journal gives a student an opportunity for reflection on his or her experiences and is shared only with the program coordinator. The journal enables the coordinator to be aware of the student's daily experiences and to identify issues for consideration during seminars.

The coordinator of the program also monitors the students' activities through *frequent, regularly scheduled visits to placements.* During visits the coordinator can share some of the student's experiences and offer suggestions to both the student and the placement supervisor for fur-

ther learning. The visits are also important in that they enable the coordinator to determine that the student is not engaged in repetitious, routine work. The school and the placement supervisor should see that students do not become free labor. Students learn by doing in community-based learning, but they should progress to new learning when a particular type of skill has been acquired. The heart of community-based learning is not the learning of skills, but an integrated learning experience that leads the young person toward a more mature view of his or her world.

Student Response

As they begin a community-based learning program, the students, like their peers, are anticipating adulthood, sometimes eagerly, sometimes fearfully, but almost always with little notion of what it means to be an adult. By the time they complete the program, there are many positive changes evident in the feelings they have about the future. Students are more confident, more sensitive to the demands of adulthood, and more receptive to the diversity of human experience. They are more knowledgeable about their options for education and careers. Perhaps most important, they feel better prepared to meet the challenge of adult responsibilities.

The community participants show overwhelmingly positive responses to the young people with whom they share their knowledge and experience. In return, they enjoy the energizing influence of youthful enthusiasm and receptivity to learning.

It would seem that an educational experience that evokes such positive and significant results would be rare, and yet in Allegheny County such experiences have occurred again and again. They offer convincing evidence that the school and the community can work together in the socialization of our youth.

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