

When the Community Becomes the Teaching Ground

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By reaching out to a broader section of the business and professional community, schools can not only improve their outside learning programs, but their relationships with the public as well.

Work study programs have become common additions to curricula at high schools across the country. Students gain practical experience in the working world and often get a head start in obtaining or keeping jobs once they graduate.

But should such programs concentrate solely on semi-skilled entry level positions? At McCluer North Senior High School in Florissant, Missouri, there is a program under way that has achieved much more over the past five years not only in terms of education, but also in strengthening relations between the school and the community it serves.

Considerably broader in scope than the usual cooperative education project, McCluer North's Community Learning Program exposes students to the widest possible range of skills and professions in the area. Accounting, airline work, architecture, fire fighting, interior decorating, law, law enforcement, nursing, teaching, veterinary medicine, and x-ray technology are some of the fields they may experience.

Students keep daily journals of what they do, reviewing them regularly with their faculty advisors—one teacher to every 20 students in the program. They spend three class periods a day four days a week for nine weeks with their outside sponsors, working without pay but earning an equivalent amount of class credits. On their weekly "day in" they take part in seminar discussions and study projects aimed at supplementing their working experience.

Surprising Results

The results have surprised even the most hopeful of the program's supporters. In a survey that compared students' attitudes at the start and end of their training, far more than expected showed increased confidence in themselves and their abilities, a better ability to communicate with others, and a greater sense of what they hoped to gain from their education.

Some students received enough training to qualify for jobs with their sponsors or other businesses. One young man was able to open a radiator repair shop because his father was so impressed with what his son had learned that he was willing to help finance the venture. A young woman who worked at a florist shop during her last semester in school was trained well enough to manage the shop following graduation.

Students benefit further when applying for admission to colleges or vocational schools from having professional contacts. A letter of recommendation from someone in the business community has often provided the competitive advantage a student has needed. What's more, advice from community sponsors about how to prepare for a career is often taken more seriously than that offered by school advisors and counselors.

The area's business commu-



ity, whose participation is so vital, has been enthusiastic about the program as well. Most sponsors greatly enjoy working and sharing their knowledge with young people. In a survey, three out of four sponsors said they were impressed with students' eagerness to learn and more than 60 percent found students more responsible or reliable than they originally believed. Seventy-nine percent reported they felt more than compensated for whatever inconvenience they may have been caused—and would recommend that other members of the business community take part.

Not surprisingly, McCluer North's image and reputation have been substantially enhanced. Sixty-one percent of the sponsors indicated they had a higher opinion of the school's efforts in preparing students for working and for choosing a career and subsequent education.

Parents Pleased

Parents, too, have noticed marked improvements in their chil-

dren's self-confidence, maturity, and sense of responsibility. Three-fourths of parents questioned said their children had set more goals for themselves and nearly as many indicated their children appeared to have a better sense of what they wanted to do after high school.

In addition, as among the sponsors, parents' views of the school itself were improved. Fully 70 percent subscribed to the statement: "I see more value in the education my son/daughter is receiving through McCluer North Senior High School."

The Community Learning Program has functioned well thanks to the eager participation of the business community and the encouragement of school administrators and faculty. With supportive administrators and open-minded, flexible teachers, programs like this could flourish virtually everywhere. Thousands more could share the benefits that are made possible through this kind of out-of-school learning. *EL*



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