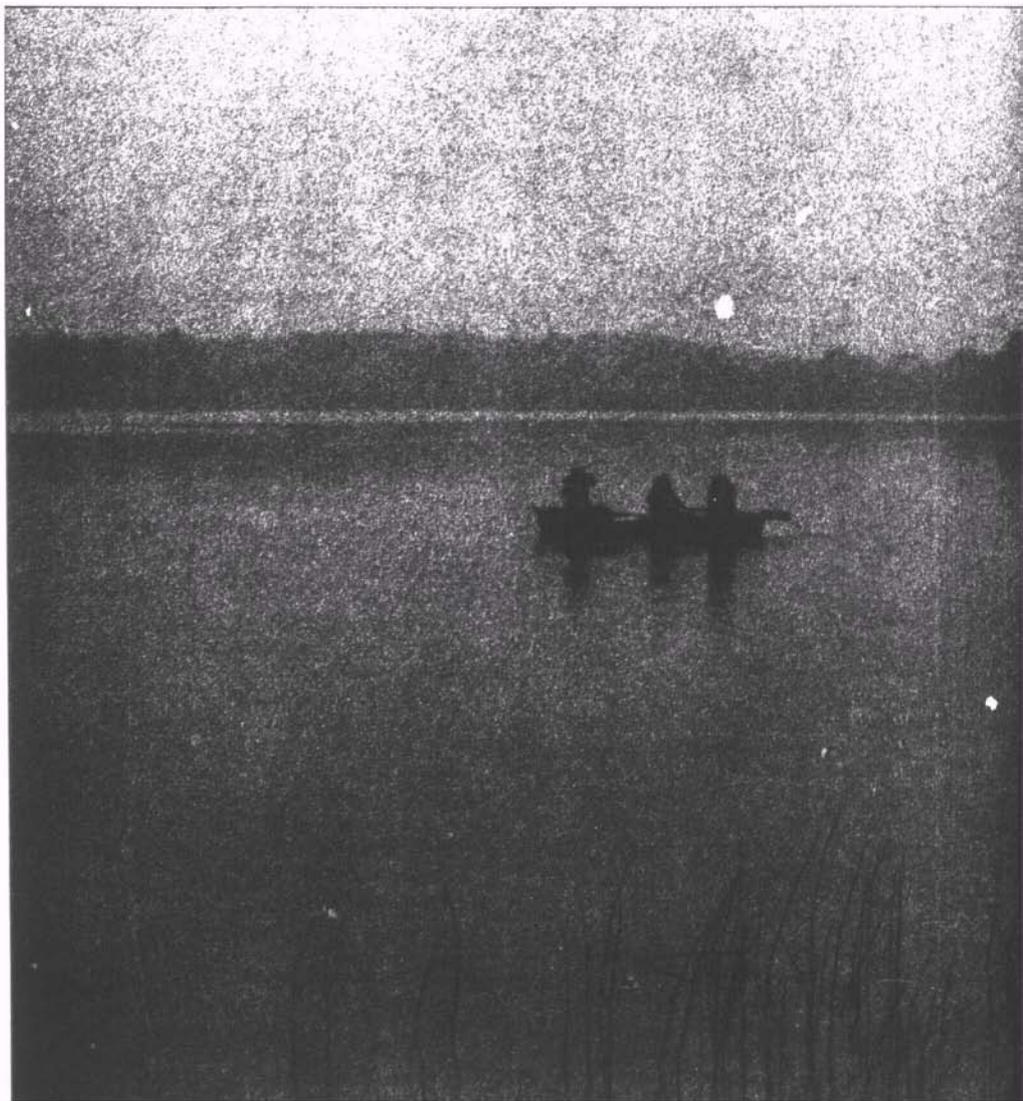


Student Leadership Camp for Improving School Climate

Junior and senior high schools in Garden City, Michigan, restored school spirit with a retreat for student leaders.



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Want a challenge? Try to maintain positive climate in a district with a 48 percent enrollment decline in a 12-year period. This drastic reduction of 6,706 students resulted in six school closings, layoff of teachers hired after 1970, and no operational millage increase since 1968. A 42-day teacher strike in which 11 teachers were sent to jail also contributed to staff, student, and community demoralization and left a community dissatisfied with its schools and a school district at rock bottom.

The name of the community: Garden City, Michigan. The task faced by the district: convince voters of a need to support their schools with additional revenues to maintain present programs and reinstate lost services.

To begin, community members and educators worked intensively with the new superintendent on a millage campaign. In a show of support, the voters overwhelmingly approved an additional 7.5 mills in March 1980. With additional revenue plus positive attitude changes, school officials then began to rebuild the educational system in Garden City.

The first major objective was to reawaken school pride and spirit, especially in the secondary schools. The superintendent met on several occasions with each department and school staff, visited as many classrooms as possible, and held informal discussions with students. Since involving students in improving school morale would give them a feeling of ownership and pride, this became the approach.

Student Leadership Camp

The first innovation was a student leadership camp which began when two junior high and two high school principals each identified eight student leaders from their schools. The chosen students represented a wide cross section. Although some were the traditional student leaders, others were informal leaders—those who didn't necessarily conform to all school rules or those currently classified as "burnouts." Several students, especially at the junior high level, were

extremely shy while others were assertive.

The director of secondary curriculum coordinated meetings with the principals and a student planning committee to prepare an agenda for the camp. In the meetings the administrators were casually dressed, seated among the students, and actively participating—all to convey their interest in working with the students.

"We have found a way to maximize the potential of our greatest resource—the youth."

Getting Started

An outside consultant with expertise in helping the participants feel more comfortable led the first activity. Students and administrators wrote their names in the middle of a 5" by 7" card and listed things they would like others to know about them. The group members then pinned their cards on and mingled in a large open area until each had read every other person's card. They could not speak, but they could convey a message nonverbally if they wished.

This part of the activity enabled students and administrators to make a brief, low risk contact with every person present. After the mingling process, participants formed triads with people they didn't know. They discussed what was written on their cards and shared positive first impressions of each other. "Processing" the activity later, the participants were surprised by how comfortable they felt with new people in such a short period of time.

Since an important part of improving school climate is communication and sharing, the next portion of the morning's program emphasized listening, a necessary aspect of communication. In groups of two, one participant first roleplayed poor listening by not looking at

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the speaker's face; standing on a chair to speak; and changing the subject. The ridiculousness of many of the poses encouraged laughter and the groups loosened up. Workshop participants then discussed and practiced good listening: the value of eye contact, comfortable versus uncomfortable proximity, and attention to what a person is saying.

During several sessions throughout the two-day experience, time was set aside so that the four groups, each co-chaired by a principal and a student, would meet separately. In these sessions, topics were brainstormed such as "Strengths and Weaknesses of Our School," "School Spirit and Pride Ideas," and "Where Do We Go From Here?" When the school groups reported their ideas to the large group, they were rewarded by enthusiastic applause. School and district cohesiveness was beginning to take form.

Of course, the sessions weren't all work. Some time was set aside for games, canoeing, and even a disco dance, with all participating.

Camp Impact

As a direct result of the Student Leadership Camp, Radcliff Junior High implemented a Principal's Planning Committee (PPC) which meets weekly to provide student input on school decisions and initiate school spirit activities. The PPC started the Super Teacher Award (given weekly to a different teacher), the Golden Apple Award (to people outside of Radcliff who help the school), and sponsored and judged a school theme contest. The group plans Friday noon-time spirit contests, hosts a Teacher Appreciation Breakfast, and is studying student lunch program concerns. The principal reports, "Because the level of student involvement in decision making is high, there has been a high degree of student support for new discipline procedures implemented at the school. Students know they have a voice in their school and they are becoming proud of it and of their involvement."

At Cambridge Junior High a re-established student council sponsors evening dances, movies, and pizza parties. Student committees are in charge of all the activities with help from parent volunteers. Students also plan the school's assemblies and a canned food collection for needy families at Christmas.

East High School students who attended the camp have planned and implemented numerous activities, such as Homecoming Week, community Christmas tree lighting, special assemblies,



and spirit meetings with each class. They started a spirit club; involved more students in making daily announcements; and have taken steps to involve students from feeder schools in high school activities.

West High School leadership camp participants are working with activity groups and the school newspaper to inform the community of upcoming events. They sponsored a T-shirt sale and planned a week-long winter carnival.

In addition, students who attended the leadership camp act as hosts and hostesses for school guests, represent the student body before the board of education, and function as a sounding board for the

building administrative and teaching staff.

All problems haven't been resolved. The district enrollment will continue to decline and necessitate program reductions, but we have found a way to maximize the potential of our greatest resource—the youth. The student leadership camp was designed to motivate, to renew, to get some things started. In the words of one principal, "The most meaningful result of the leadership camp was the opportunity it provided for building administrators and students to meet in an informal setting, get to know one another as people, and at the same time make plans to improve our schools." ■

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