

Tackling World Hunger in an Elementary School

With responsible consumption and community support, the students of Weybridge Elementary School, Vermont, saved the lives of 1,101 children around the world in just five months.

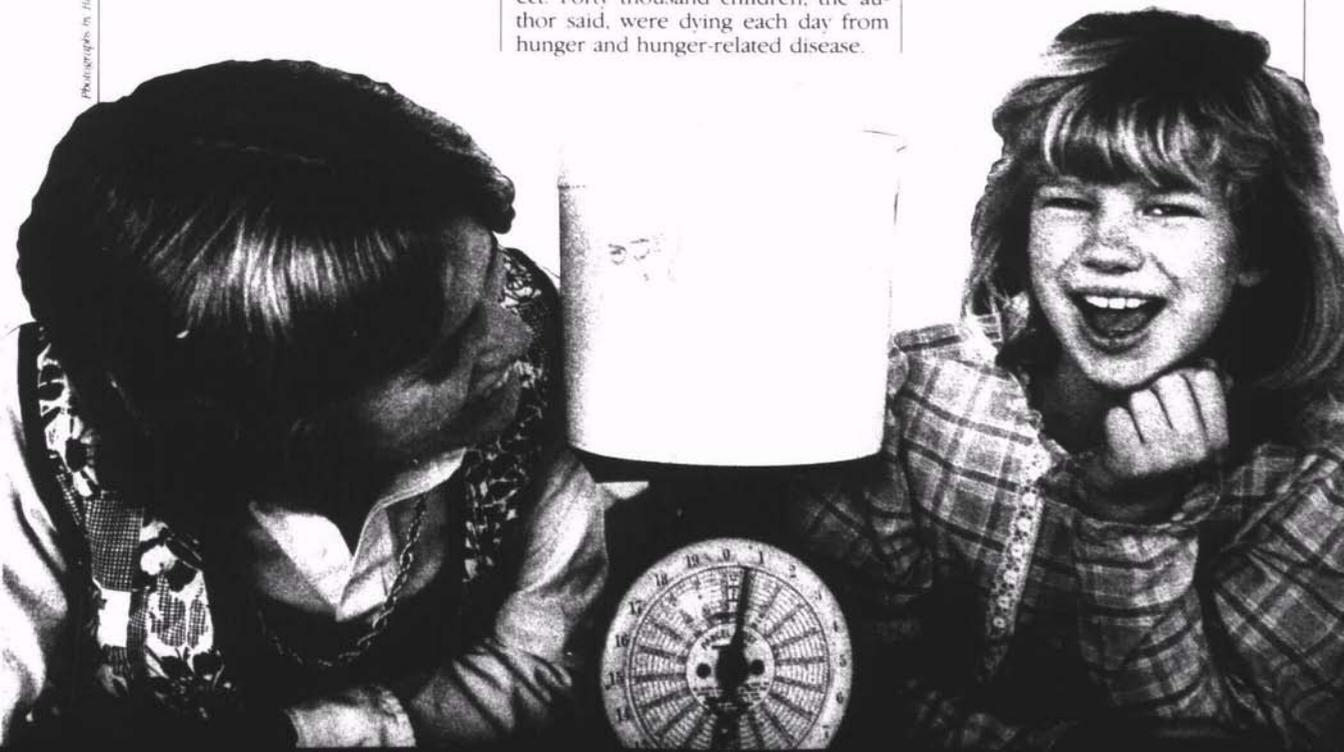
It began at my own dinner table. I remember, as a child, sitting for seemingly endless hours in staring confrontation with a then-cold and decidedly ominous heap of uneaten vegetables piled on my plate. I'd push them here and spread them out there, contemplating my chances for weaseling out of their inevitable ingestion. "Eat your peas; people are starving in China." I would have been more than happy to send those peas anywhere but into my own stomach.

Later, as both student and teacher, I knew well the familiar after-lunch scene in almost any school: lunch trays stacked askew, pounds of untouched, wasted food being scraped mindlessly and methodically into large institutional garbage cans. Day after day, year after year, school after school, the pattern was predictable.

Yet, as a teacher in a small Vermont school with only 78 K-6 students, the significance of this problem didn't really affect me, until one day several years ago when I ran across an article published by the World Hunger Project. Forty thousand children, the author said, were dying each day from hunger and hunger-related disease.

The Challenge

Although the figure was staggering, I was assured world hunger could be eliminated by the year 2000. The technology and food supplies were available. The challenge was clear to me: how could I extend the boundaries of my small Vermont schoolhouse to embody the enormity and reality of the world around it? More important, how could I personalize this global awareness so that it would have direct, concrete meaning to each student in the school? I knew children need to internalize knowledge, experience it, to



truly claim it as their own. From time to time we had undertaken various recycling activities, kept track of lunch waste, focused on energy conservation, and walked for world hunger relief. These efforts, though laudable, seemed transitory. I was convinced there had to be a way to bring home the interconnectedness of school, community, and world; to address global issues on a meaningful level for more than just a special day, class period, or science unit; to help children realize that they are a part of a much larger community, that they have a role in that community, and that they can influence it, no matter how small they might feel. I was committed to the belief that an individual's actions can make a difference in the world. How could I help children experience that constructive power themselves?

The Plan

If effective distribution of food and cooperation among nations were the two pivotal factors in alleviating hunger, I needed to bring them into focus for the students of our school. How could they realize that their wastefulness broke down the distribution system; that, in effect, what they threw away could have been food that someone else would have eaten; that gluttonous or wasteful countries were part of the same overall exercise that resulted in under- or malnourished nations in other parts of the world? Short of putting our peas in an envelope, how could we help reverse our selfish overconsumption and wastefulness? The key was to do something ourselves that would result in making food accessible in other places where it was needed more.

As a public school teacher, I had to be sensitive to the many perspectives others might hold toward any given organization we might contact. After researching various international agencies, I chose UNICEF as a recognized, long-time advocate of children and a responsible agent in worldwide hunger alleviation. Its focus on children seemed to be an especially appropriate point of personal identification for our students. I read and questioned and thought about various foodstuffs and supplies that UNICEF sent to other countries until I discovered K-Mix II. Developed as a high-



potency supplement given on an intensive basis to severely malnourished children, K-Mix II literally makes the difference between life and death. One pound of K-Mix II, which can restore the health of one severely malnourished child, costs just one American dollar.

The challenge now had a vehicle. We were consuming irresponsibly while others died from not consuming at all. An organization existed with ready access to shipping networks and a life-saving food therapy. We could be the catalyst: the money we saved through responsible consumption and waste reduction could be redistributed as life-saving K-Mix II for others.

As I thought about past walk-a-thons, jump-a-thons, and bike-a-thons, the trilogy of one pound of K-Mix II/one dollar/one saved life resurfaced in my mind, and an idea evolved. For every day that all of Weybridge School wasted less than one pound of food, community members could pledge money (an amount of their own choosing). For instance, a local business might pledge ten cents per day for each day that the school successfully met its goal. Collectively, a variety of businesses might pledge the equivalent of a dollar for each day the school wasted less than a pound. For each dollar the school collected, a pound of K-Mix II could be purchased, saving the life of one malnourished child. If enough community members joined our efforts, the combined per-day pledges might mean more than one pound of K-Mix II might be provided, and more than one life could be saved each day.

The Process

The idea worked on paper; however, to be effective the actual resolve had to

come from the students themselves. I was determined that it be an entirely voluntary effort of students as well as the community. I decided to present the possibility of a Waste Watch Resolution in December, let students consider it over the holiday, and begin in the New Year if interest was sufficient.

It was. I decided to make our New Year's resolution known at that time so that interested citizens could join our efforts. There was no direct solicitation; instead, we welcomed those who called or wrote on their own initiative, knowing their pledges were a sincere indication of support for our project. Because my objectives were wholly educational, it was critical that this not become a fundraising event.

Before we started, numerous aspects of the Waste Watch needed to be addressed. I was still concerned, for instance, that the saving of children's lives be made concrete for the children of our school. This became a central focus of the program. We began by hanging up one paper doll each time our efforts saved a life in the world. The growing chain of dolls wound its way, hand in hand, around us. They were a constant, visual representation of a project that eventually permeated every area of our curriculum and seeped not only into our own homes (mini-Waste Watches were carried out at family dinner tables), but into the homes of citizens across the United States and Canada.

Large weekly charts and graphs, mobiles, maps, student posters, and artwork hung from every wall and rafter of the lunchroom. All school films, speakers, projects, and trips focused on nutrition, hunger, and world food supplies. Individual classes initiated challenges to the rest of the school, listing sayings that included

food ("apple of my eye," "cream of the crop"); exploring fables that employed food as a vehicle for a moral ("The Fox and the Grapes," "The Milkmaid and Her Pail"); and setting up poster and essay contests ("Pack a Safe Lunch," "Super Snacks," "What the Waste Watch Means to Me"). Multi-age student groups analyzed school lunches, compared food costs, and explored the economics of world food distribution; others wrote letters to newspapers, reported on related books, and wrote an original Waste Watch song; still others entered statistics on the school's computer, studied foreign countries, researched colonial food preservation and preparation, and discussed relevant literature. Every corner of the curriculum had potential.

Our lunch hour became a time for all classes to share worthwhile moments as a school community. To facilitate this, we began serving lunch family-style. The Parents' Club purchased fabric, which teachers sewed into tablecloths. Several mothers designed aprons for students, and children created centerpieces for each lunch table. Students sat in multi-age groups with a head of table and a waiter who brought serving dishes from the kitchen. They began observing the common courtesies of standing until everyone was present for lunch, waiting to eat until everyone at the table was served, and ending conversation when schoolmates or teachers rose to make daily announcements. These new roles and responsibilities gave the whole lunch process a symbolic quality: both the people and the food we were eating took on a new importance. "Take what you can eat" became a reasonable guideline as children kept a watch on waste.

Daily announcements and Waste Watch news filled half of the lunch hour. Students practiced public speaking skills as they shared individual and group projects, read Waste Watch mail, posed problems to be solved, and reported on the school's progress. Each day's Watcher of the Waste announced the amount of tray, milk, and kitchen waste and graphed it on large charts in the lunchroom. Above us hung reminders of our interdependence—supporters' names from across the United States, including an editor from Massachusetts, 50 kids

from Kansas, a court clerk, a former clown, and a fifth-generation Vermonter. And around us hung paper doll symbols of saved lives halfway around the world. Through cooperative efforts, sharing, and a sense of responsibility, the school became a community working together on a common goal.

The reality of the children's motto, "We Can Make A Difference," was extended through the letters and responses they received. From schoolchildren across the country to Charles Kuralt and President Reagan, students received correspondence scribbled on everything from five-cent notepads to formal stationery. As they colored in the states on our large wall map or viewed themselves in national current-event filmstrips, students actually saw their message spread.

Hosting visitors from newspapers, magazines, and other schools, students felt their newfound influence. And as they waved goodbye to the bright orange helicopter of a Boston television station, a small school literally watched its news travel over the Green Mountains of Vermont into the larger world beyond.

Reflections

My eight years as an elementary school teacher had taught me the importance of making abstract concepts concrete. I was no stranger to chip trading and Cuisenaire rods, to Mexican dioramas and Dutch tulip projects. But Waste Watch taught me that school-age children can also investigate abstract concepts with significant human impact—democracy, scarcity, war, arbitration, and interdependence—if we make them concrete through real-world experiences. By assuming that I had to leave these concepts to the upper grades, I had missed a wonderfully ripe and curious time for learning. When hunger enabled us to bring the largeness of the world and the way it worked to a concrete level, the children showed me they were ready to learn.

In addition, I felt a refreshing sense of balance as I watched children experience the interdependence of the subjects and skills they employed during the Waste Watch. Previously compartmentalized lessons now made sense. They had coherence. The Waste Watch enabled us to see the multifac-

eted nature of a single reality—in this case, world hunger—and the numerous perspectives from which it could be viewed. It would be very hard for me to return to the artificiality of segregated subjects taught in lock-step sequence. The children naturally saw the interplay of subjects within a whole. Why hadn't I?

Studying and acting on behalf of world hunger united the entire school behind an effort they had chosen to value. The typical, once-chaotic zoo story called lunch became a relaxed, congenial gathering for our K-6 community. The transformation had a little to do with the procedural changes we had made, and a lot to do with the feelings children had about the Waste Watch. I could comfortably retire my pat speech on the benefits of cooperative effort. The building buzzed with it. I was energized by the personal validation I felt.

Just as our school discovered what it was to become a community, so did we rethink its boundaries and impact. Certainly students would not learn solely within the four walls of a classroom for the rest of their lives. If I purported to teach skills that would stand by them throughout their lives, I needed to extend their vision by relating how what we did affected others on a global scale; by asking how what we did or did not do could have an impact.

More than once since the project began, I have found myself sitting and absorbing the lunchroom scene, surveying the long paper doll chain that encircles the school, thinking of the cold piles of peas I used to know. In their own way, our students began with peas too; studying and internalizing the facts of world hunger, they were able to translate their emotions into constructive action. Their commitment, in turn, caught the attention of the media, national and international wire services, educators, boards, and action organizations throughout the United States, Europe, and Africa. The attention surprised us, and the international ripple effect was far greater than we could have imagined. But the warmth I feel for a small school whose students chose to influence the world is greater still. □

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