Learning Leadership

An unusual class at Lakeland High School in Shrub Oak, New York, benefits students, their school, and their community.

Once upon a time, American high schools were represented in the public imagination by certain images. "Teenager" and "high school" sparked recollections of Andy Hardy taking time from chem lab and term papers to produce a play for a local charity. "Archie" and friends laboring long hours to decorate the gym for the prom; athletes fighting for victory while parent volunteers took time out from the hot dog stand to root the team on. Of course these were unrealistic images; they overlooked many less healthy facets of the typical high school of those days. Still, for most of us, these images were what American high schools were about. Schools were places where such things did go on, not always and not for everyone, but enough to make support for education something that was taken for granted. We were proud of our schools.

Then, in the 1960s and '70s, something soured. Andy Hardy was replaced in the taxpayers' minds by antisocial, drug-dealing delinquents who cut more classes than they attended in a graffiti-smeared school. While this image was as much a caricature as the earlier idealized version of the American high school student, there was enough truth in it to cause concern. Things were happening in schools that would never have been tolerated in earlier decades. Teachers complained as loudly as taxpayers. The current

Lakeland High School students, working with a Morris Nursing Home resident, find they "uncover their genuine commitment, perseverance, and determination to serve." Photographs by Alice Leighner/Waterfall Group.
"The leadership teacher must be supportive, a dependable resource, a guide and counselor, one who encourages students to 'make it happen.'"

demand for a return to discipline, rigid standards, and a back-to-basics curriculum is just one result.

It is an old cliché in administration circles, but true nonetheless: 90 percent of the rules in a school are made for 10 percent of the students. And every time a student from that disruptive 10 percent acts irresponsibly, another rule is likely to be implemented. Someone vandalizes a restroom, so it is locked—for everyone. A handful of students fight at an athletic event, so it is cancelled—for everyone. A fire alarm is pulled—and the entire student body and staff stands for ten minutes in the mid-winter cold.

Vandalism and general apathy were the catalysts for the Leadership Program I instituted in 1980 at Lakeland High School in northern Westchester County, New York. Some students, for instance, were no longer using the restrooms, refusing to wade through the trash, graffiti, and cigarette smoke in bathrooms with cracked mirrors and broken doors. Then a group of 35 students gathered for a meeting. Like the famed Peter Finch character in the movie *Network*, they looked at what was happening and said, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore!" These were not the "best" or "most gifted" students; they represented a cross-section of the student population. They talked for hours. They argued. They came up with ideas. They decided to make a change, and they did.

It was here that Leadership began almost five years ago. Today, over 100 students apply for the course each year by writing several essays and going through a series of interviews. No one is eliminated—no one is "cut." They begin their Leadership experience by completing individual, school, and community projects over the late spring and early summer months. The long hours uncover their genuine commitment, perseverance, and determination to serve. By the time the summer workshops are completed, the original number of applicants is vastly reduced to a more workable figure. The students who have endured the preliminary stages are the new leaders. The students who decide that the time commitment is just too much withdraw; however, it must be noted that they have helped the program greatly while they were involved.
Because Lakeland teenagers know that you have to know yourself before you can lead others, they participate in "values clarification/self-actualization exercises to make [them] aware of their potential and limitations." and always seem to be there when we need "extra hands" to help out. The common denominator for students who remain seems to be the desire to "count" and to "make a difference."

**What Is Leadership?**

Leadership means different things to different people—power, prestige, honor, or personal advantage. I believe that real leadership begins with service to others. The program is a full-year course. It is not a frill; nor is it an easy grade. It was designed as a course and not as a co-curricular activity—because of its fundamental academic nature. Reading, writing, listening, speaking, and reasoning are at the forefront of all leadership endeavors. A grade is given to each student based on class performance, daily assignments, mini-problem-solving activities, semester-long projects, and many other factors. The tenets of the program are threefold—to serve the needs of self, school, and community.

**Self-Analysis**

Self-improvement is the first phase of the Leadership Program and a necessary component to its success. During the semester, students undertake an in-depth self-analysis and begin the study of inspirational and motivational readings, on the assumption that before leading others, individuals must be able to lead themselves. This phase consists of activities and values clarification/self-actualization exercises to make students aware of their potential and limitations. They learn how to deal with group dynamics and the pressures of assuming leadership roles. By this time, students should have learned (1) how others perceive them and why, (2) how to listen, (3) how to deal with others, (4) how to make decisions and live with the results, (5) how to persuade and influence others, and (6) how to stand up for their principles in the face of adversity.

**School Improvement**

The second phase of the Leadership Program addresses the needs of the school. Students develop, coordinate, and participate in year-long school service committees, including the

- Announcement Committee. This committee writes, edits, and delivers

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all in-school announcements; birth
days, club, and sport announcements;
important events; building news; and
other pertinent information.

- **Bulletin Board Committee.** In
  consultation with the administration,
  this committee manages all bulletin
  boards in the building, helping each
  class and organization maintain their
  boards. In addition, they run a "What's
  Happenin'" board that features a
  quote of the day.

- **Newspaper Committee.** Cooperating
  with local newspapers, this committee
  writes a weekly column highlighting
  school news. It provides good
  press for the school, and students
  enjoy the thrill of having their own by-
  line and being published.

- **Supervisory Committee.** This is an
  organized effort to improve the school
  atmosphere. Students learn to cooper-
  ate with staff members and each other
to make the school a better place to
  be. Members are taught that it is better
to report suspicious activity than re-
  main quiet and risk letting a fellow

Community Involvement
In addition to asserting their leadership roles within the school, students
volunteer for community service, assis-
ting worthwhile charitable, religious,
or humanitarian groups. "Whenever
There Is a Need" and "Service Above
Self" are our mottos. Working in the
community gives great satisfaction; by
"giving something back" students dis-
cover the true joy that comes from
helping others, especially those in
need. They realize they truly can make
a difference and can continue to do so
throughout life.

Student leaders work as teachers' aides in schools for the handicapped,
or tutor students having trouble in our
school. Local hospitals provide oppor-
tunities for work as candy strippers and
nurses aides, and nursing homes en-
able students to bring a little happy-
ness into the lives of their patients.
They have also steered the kids toward
homebound elderly who have been
aided by students who take care of
simple chores. The opportunities are
limitless and allow students to experi-
ment with possible career choices as
well. They get the chance to sample
the atmosphere in different environ-
ments and sometimes make valuable
contacts.

The Leadership class, as a group,
also organizes and sponsors various
school-community projects, such as
community health fairs, blood drives,
and charitable fund raisers. In addition
to the obvious personal rewards, bet-
ter public relations is a welcome plus:
there is little to fault in a school that
cares so about the community.

The Leadership Teacher
Clearly, any teacher who becomes in-
volved in this type of Leadership Pro-
gram is a special person. The job
demands a considerable amount of
extra time for summer workshops,
after-school and evening functions,
community contacts, and supervising
students during activities after school
hours. And, while all teachers are lead-
ers, Leadership teachers must be con-
stantly aware of their image as role
models, not just for the students but
for the other adults who become in-
volved in the program.

Does It Work?
Do Leadership students actually be-
come leaders? Our program has been
in existence for less than five years, so
I cannot point to any U.S. Senators or
corporation presidents from our
ranks. I am confident, though, that
many of our students will go on to
experience success in life at least in
part because of their Leadership in-
volvement. The stakes are high, for it is
this generation of Americans who will
run the country when the present
generation of educators are senior citi-
zens. □

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