

# Learning Life on the Road

Through Traveling School, Santa Cruz teenagers experience a full cycle of learning—including a seven-week tour of the country—not possible in schools bound by four walls.

Through a combination of extended touring, family wellness training, and instruction in group-living skills, the Santa Cruz City School District is helping youngsters cope with the pressures and complexities of life. "Traveling School" was started to test the idea that students would gain a more complete education if their classroom were on wheels. Each semester 36 boys and girls in grades 7-12 take to the road to be taught a full range of academics along with a comprehensive Personal Growth Curriculum. For 7 of the 18 weeks students tour a region of the United States or Canada in a school bus, living in hostels, environmental learning centers, motels, and group camps. The district allocates the same funding for Traveling School students as for those in traditional schools. The additional \$1,300-per student cost is financed through fees, fund raising, and scholarships.

After three years of operation, the academic program has won three Golden Bell Awards from the California School Board Association for excellence, innovation, and impact on helping young people deal with life. Recognizing the value of Traveling School, the Edward W. Hazen Foundation and the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation have granted funding for staff development to provide training during the summer of 1988 for any school district in the country interested in replicating the Traveling School Program.

## Operating Principles

Traveling School is based on three interconnected principles designed to empower students to take charge of their lives.

1. *Complete learning includes a cycle of gathering information, applying what has been learned, reflecting on the results, generalizing to other situations, and generating new questions.* Traveling School is structured so that a lesson may start at any point in the cycle. For example, students began a

study of the Watergate era by gathering information. They read works of historians and participants. Later, when the tour brought them to John Ehrlichman's home town of Santa Fe, the students were primed with questions to ask him. Among many questions, they asked, "What did you learn from your experiences, and how would you do it differently?" He replied that his mistake had been to be loyal to the President instead of to the Constitution. Following the interview,

*Photographs by Stephen Myers*



*It's exciting, but it's not easy: students on tour have to manage their own schedules, arguments, money, and laundry.*

students reflected on Ehrlichman's answers in a lively class debate, followed by written essays. From these discussions, students were able to generalize their knowledge and better understand the operations of the Constitution and the complexities of government. They identified new questions that reflected their deeper level of understanding, such as, "How can government protect itself from the ambitions of unelected officials?" and "What does this tell us about the Iran/Contra Affair?" These lessons also transferred to their own student government operations.

The governance of students' own affairs begins in the application stage of the learning cycle. From day one students must manage their own schedules, discipline, and room organization. On the tour, they must resolve interpersonal conflicts, plan meals, do laundry, clean up the facility, schedule their recreation, and manage personal finances. Through daily meetings, students evaluate results and generate new solutions to problems. At this point, they generally become eager for new information to simplify their work and to help manage themselves better. For example, after two weeks of touring, students in one group expressed resentment over what they thought were racist and sexist comments made by some junior high boys. After a discussion in which students shared ideas about what constitutes racist or sexist comments and whether one said in jest is as bad as one said in anger, the group agreed that any comment or joke about color, religion, or sex had the potential to hurt and was not OK.

Motivation for learning often begins when students realize, through reflection, that they have an opportunity to apply their new knowledge from one source to another situation. For example, after two days of touring EPCOT Center in Orlando, students called a meeting. Many resented the glitter and overuse of technology to create a fantasy world. In their discussions, students began to draw upon the talks they had had in Santa Cruz with a county supervisor who had strong en-

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vironmental convictions. He had pointed out the relationship between new technology and the problems brought about by those inventions. The automobile, for example, became an ecological nightmare despite its benefits. During the last day at EPCOT, students negotiated with staff for a different sort of lesson. Instead of writing about the exhibits, they interviewed tourists and guides about the problems these developments might create; then they shared the results with each other back in the classroom.

2. *The value of learning increases when it is applied to life situations that matter.* In typical classrooms, applications are often discussed but seldom experienced. Even less frequently are applications made to the most important aspects of students' lives: family, relationships with peers, personal development, and topical issues such as the exercise of political power, racism, sexism, environmental conservation, and peace making.

To experience different perspectives on racial separation and the possibilities for integration, students lived in the homes of black and white families in Memphis, where students at-

tend schools of choice. As a result of that experience, the ideas of authors they had been reading—O'Connor, Faulkner, Walker, King, and Douglas—moved from the conceptual to the personal level.

Understanding issues of governance, power brokering, and social and economic conflicts between public and personal interests starts concretely in Traveling School. When 36 boys and girls live together for six weeks, their daily needs depend upon cooperation and mutual support. The struggle between egocentric desires and the wants and needs of the group is constant. Meal preparation, living arrangements, following basic rules, and solving interpersonal problems provide instructors with concrete examples to use when studying social conflicts and their resolution.

After students visited the Washington Legislature and Parliament in British Columbia, for example, they decided to change their own class governance from an elected president to a manager chosen by delegates. When students return to Santa Cruz, their appetites for learning have increased along with their motivation to apply their new knowledge to situations at home.

3. *Situations that matter to students include testing and expanding their limits.* To discover their limits, students must discover new points of view and learn techniques for exceeding their physical, intellectual, or interpersonal barriers. As part of a psycho-educational Personal Growth Curriculum, students participate in a series of Theme Days designed to confront limits in their attitudes about their bodies, drugs, and sex; their relationships with parents; self-expression; and personal responsibility.

Theme Days challenge students to examine their thinking, experience learning from contrasting sources, and consider possibilities that once seemed unreasonable. Starting with the Distinction Theme, which focuses on the effect of language on perception, students learn how their inner voices judge and evaluate information according to already-formed standards

and beliefs. First, students list words they use that limit awareness and choice and then words that expand their awareness of possibilities: "I will"... "I promise"... "I can" instead of "Yes"... "but"... "Maybe I can"... "I can't help it, it's just the way I am." The shift is toward commitment, objective/descriptive language, and opportunity instead of judgment, limitations, and justification. The use of various readings as reinforcing examples plants the seed for students to examine the impact their speaking and listening have on their actions and thinking.

Later, in a science lesson, the concept is approached from another angle, when students receive instruction for scientific observation and must use nonjudgmental, verifiable descriptions when making observations. Throughout the semester students practice by recording in science observation journals exactly what they see in a particular environment. The same skills are encouraged when they encounter personal upsets in the group; students learn to speak from personal observa-

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*At historic Mission San Jose (San Antonio, Texas), a ranger explains to students the role of the missions in settling the frontier, information they will reflect on and apply in other situations.*

tion rather than from accusation and assumption.

The impact of these activities is often dramatic. For example, during Parent Theme Day students look at the effect that lying and withholding information can have on the level of trust and expression of love they experience. During one discussion last fall, close to 40 percent of the students revealed (most for the first time) past exposure to sexual abuse, rape, or secret abortions. During the evening session, students wrote letters to their parents about these experiences and sent them by overnight mail. Back home, licensed family counselors delivered them at a meeting at which parents received instruction on how to reinforce the growth their children were making. Only by having a level of group trust among the students and the parents, which developed slowly over the semester, could such discussions be possible.

Long daily schedules also test students' limits. Each 14- to 16-hour day on the road starts with an hour of strenuous exercise followed by breakfast, clean-up, and a full day's activity, which may include touring a museum, state park, or urban area; meeting with people from government or local schools; or staying put and having traditional classroom instruction or a Theme Day activity. Over the 18 weeks, the students progress from easily distractible, mostly passive pupils with attention spans of about 40 minutes to learners capable of sustaining concentrated discussion, writing, and group collaboration.

Students practice their new skills on the tour in various ways. For example, when students visited the controversial city of Rajneeshpuram, Oregon, they received a guided tour and met with adult and teenage inhabitants to hear about their way of life. Most left the city feeling empathy for the red-clad followers of Bhagwan Rajneesh. That night the students were guests at a barbecue dinner hosted by local ranchers who told their side of the story. Students' opinions shifted; many felt confused about whom to believe. Having heard passionate and personal experiences from two opposing sides, the students found their own thinking broadened. The experience challenged them to look beyond a simplistic view of right or wrong. The papers they wrote the next day reflected more sophisticated, individualized thinking characterized by compassion as well as logic.

#### **Challenges Lead to Growth**

Traveling School tours are intense, demanding, and challenging. By the end of a tour, students who once were strangers to each other and certain on the first day of class that they would never fit in—or even want to—come together into a tight, trusting, and often loving unit. They learn that by risking their vulnerability they can earn trust, respect, and a sense of partnership with others.

To reinforce students' growth and ensure its continuation after students leave the program, Traveling School includes the family in the process. Students and their families attend six two-hour sessions of a Family Well-

ness Program, where they receive instruction and practice in problem-solving skills. Each semester starts and ends with a weekend Family Retreat led by trained counselors. While students are on tour, parents meet regularly with these counselors to develop their parenting skills and lend support to the program.

Parent surveys have consistently indicated that more than 90 percent are "extremely satisfied" with the results. Many report increased trust, self-reliance, or inner-family harmony. Students' comments indicate that they learned to think and act in new ways that help them overcome personal problems as well as barriers to success in school. Studies of former students show that these changes tend to remain, especially when the family con-

tinues to use the skills taught in the program.

Research on the program's immediate and long-range results generally validates the anecdotal evidence. Student growth on the California Test of Basic Skills in both language arts and math, given at the end of each semester, showed nearly triple the growth rate compared with progress the previous year. Independently judged writing samples before and after the program showed dramatically higher scores in mechanics and style. The average truancy rate dropped from 7.1 days per semester before the program to .9 days after students left Traveling School. In addition, the dropout rate for students completing the program was less than 5 percent compared to a district average of 35 percent.

### A Complete Cycle of Learning

Traveling School transforms learners so that they feel connected to their world, experience a sense of power over their lives, and sense that what they are learning will matter. The approach consists of a complete cycle of learning that engages students in practical applications to life experiences and challenges them to stretch beyond their limits. Traveling School is a model of how public education can provide a comprehensive academic program while giving students skills for living in the real world. □

**Stephen Myers** is Director and Founder of the Traveling School. For further information concerning the July 1988 staff training, write to the author at 1901 D Court-yard Dr., Capitola, CA 95010.

## Sizing Up Your School System: The District Effectiveness Audit

by Joan L. Buttram, Thomas B. Corcoran,  
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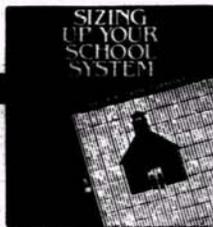
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