To Develop Thinking Citizens

By simulating their local Town Meeting, the students at Provincetown Elementary School helped their community solve some very real problems.

In 1984, teachers and administrators in the Provincetown school system sat down in earnest to develop a new curriculum to meet the demands of today's society. Giving high priority to education for citizenship and global awareness, staff members representing grades K-12 worked together to establish a set of goals for Provincetown's social studies programs. After agreeing upon these goals, the large committee subdivided to design specific curriculums appropriate to the needs and developmental levels of the students in their individual schools.

Since a good citizen must be a thinking citizen, and because we believed that social studies provides a natural context for teaching thinking, we at Provincetown Elementary School decided first to develop a plan for integrating direct instruction of critical and creative thinking skills, techniques, and processes into the subject area content.

The Future Problem-Solving Unit

In the future problem-solving unit, students participate in democracy's most basic form, the traditional New England town meeting government. To begin the unit, the teachers announce a "situation" to the student body, one that is a very real concern of our community. Last year, for example, the Director of Public Works requested that our students focus on one of his major problems. Our landfill was near capacity, the incinerator with which we had contracted had not begun operation, and the town was under intense pressure from state and federal governments to take immediate action.

After researching the problems and possible solutions, the students established a model recycling effort and educated the adult population about the ecological and economic reasons for recycling. At the Annual Town Meeting a few weeks later, the adult citizens voted to fund and construct a transfer station to enable the entire town to recycle. Today recycling is a fact of life in Provincetown.

This year the situation was the traffic congestion in our downtown. Provincetown is a small town on the narrow peninsula tip of Cape Cod where there is room enough for only two east-west streets, connected by a myriad of tiny north-south lanes. Yet Provincetown faces an incredible influx of visitors for several months each year. Most of the businesses that serve these people are located on the narrow one-way front street, and these in turn are served by an army of delivery trucks jockeying for position to unload their wares. Swarms of pedestrians add to the congestion, and bicycles are permitted to ride against traffic in recognition of the hazards of riding a bike on the steep hills of the east-west back street.

Each class dealt with this problem through its grade-level theme. The 6th

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grade’s theme was “culture diversity,” so it took on the roles of various special interest groups in the town. The students studied the situation, defined problems from the point of view of their “special interest,” and presented their solutions in the form of articles at our annual mock Town Meeting. With their theme of “economics,” the 5th grade took the part of the finance committee, studying the situation from the financial point of view. They decided whether or not to recommend each article to the voters at our mock Town Meeting. The 4th grade, studying “government,” was responsible for organizing the mock Town Meeting and assuming the roles of various government officials and town employees. The remainder of the children studied the situation and proposed articles from the point of view dictated by their grade-level themes. They attended the mock Town Meeting as voters.

Preparation for the Town Meeting

Students developed questions for interviews, attended various committee and board meetings as well as the Town Meeting, made phone calls and wrote letters to solicit information, checked with local and state officials regarding laws and regulations, visited pertinent sites and town offices, studied town warrants to learn the proper format, and practiced parliamentary procedure to become comfortable with the formality of the mock Town Meeting. They found officials and citizens helpful in all their endeavors.

In the weeks prior to the mock Town Meeting, students were busy with voter registration, elections, meetings of various student boards and committees, the writing of articles, and the educating of fellow students as to the inherent problems in the situation and the benefits of proposed solutions. Warrants were printed and posted, and the League of Student Voters visited the primary classrooms to help them understand the process and the articles themselves. Sponsors of articles wrote and practiced their presentations and speeches, and other students developed questions and arguments.

Getting Down to Business

Finally the big day arrived. Student facility supervisors set up the multipurpose room in imitation of the town hall, complete with sound system and pitchers of water.

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No Easy Answers in Democracy

This experience taught our students that some problems have no easy answers. They learned that what looks like a good solution often has a negative impact on an important segment of the community. They became aware of the clout of well-organized special interest groups, and they gained an understanding of the importance of each single vote. Along with crucial decision-making and problem-solving skills, they learned skills in research, communication, and cooperation.

And, more important, they became comfortable participants in the democratic process and gained an understanding of the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship. We hope that the involvement of our students and the community in this annual event, now in its 5th year, will produce lively, lifelong participation in government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

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