

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. Our second decision was to use a problem-solving framework to teach all social studies, with all classes from kindergarten through the 6th grade simultaneously considering the same or related topics. We also decided to limit the topics of study to only four or five per year.

The concept is simple: the whole curriculum constitutes a six-year cycle, 6th graders repeating the topics of their kindergarten year. Each grade has its own grade-level theme, and the first unit of each year is devoted to developing the class grade-level theme. The rest of the year is divided

among four units: world history, American history, a representative present-day foreign culture, and a future problem-solving unit. Thus, at any given time, the entire school studies China, or Ancient Egypt, or the Westward Expansion.

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 exam-

ple, 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.

Preparing 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.



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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. Constables took up their stations; the Board of Registrars signed in registered voters. The visitors' gallery was full, with many town officials as well as parents, high school students, and interested guests present.

The job of town moderator was shared by a student and a teacher, and strict parliamentary procedure was followed. The warrant this year contained eight articles sponsored by 6th grade special interest groups and by the 4th grade Board of Selectmen and Town Manager. For two and one-half hours the student body was caught up in intense debate over proposals to create a walking mall downtown by banning vehicular traffic, to establish revised traffic patterns, and to form committees to study specific aspects of the problem or possible solutions.

But no dramatic action took place! After the considerable discussion that surrounded the proposed solutions, the numerous changes presented in the articles were turned down. The only article passed that day was one in

which the students voted to take responsibility for their own part in the problem.

To see if the school will vote to require all Provincetown children, through the 6th grade, to complete a bicycle safety course and licensing procedure in order to be allowed to ride bicycles in the downtown area from Memorial Day to Columbus Day. (Requested by 6th graders for safety and responsibility).

All that remained was the referendum, which allows students to cast written ballots and facilitates active participation even from kindergartners and 1st graders who might not sit through a long meeting. This year's referendum question read:

Provincetown's economy depends upon tourism. We believe that the traffic congestion adds to the charm of a summer resort, and that sightseeing by tourists on Commercial Street by vehicle or on foot is crucial to the town's finances. We therefore recommend minimal interference in the natural flow of this traffic.

This referendum passed by a wide margin.

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 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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