

Educating for Living in a Nuclear Age

Educating for Living in a Nuclear Age (ELNA) is helping teachers and their students face real-world issues, express their concerns, and take action.

Social responsibility is not a path to walk alone. We cannot teach the concept of community when we work in isolation. We cannot teach conflict management if we avoid unpleasant debates, and we cannot expect to affect society when we harbor doubts about our abilities to engage in dialogue with those around us. We can build social consciousness only through experiences that help students to understand their interdependence. To teach them to become responsible and participating members of their communities, we must help them develop the skills to forge solutions to real-world problems. And we must always remember that children learn best by example.

These goals and realizations propelled the development of Educating for Living in a Nuclear Age (ELNA), which seeks a deliberate and simultaneous focus on the process as well as the content of curriculums for social responsibility. ELNA has spawned two consortiums, one in the Boston area and the other in Portland, Oregon, which have begun a long-term collaboration across the 3,000 miles that separate them.

The ELNA project began in the Boston area in 1985 when the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents issued a statement of concern about inattention to nuclear age issues in the public school curriculum. Twelve suburban public school districts responded by joining together in a voluntary partnership to promote cross-district sharing and program development.

In 1987, a second consortium developed in Portland. The Portland project has urban as well as suburban partners; our largest district enrolls more than 55,000 students while the smallest serves about 200. Furthermore, the consortium includes public and independent schools and two private colleges as well as a public university. See Figure 1 for a statement of the project mission.

In both Portland and Boston, each project school (or program within an ELNA institution) forms its own building working group (BWG) to coordinate schoolwide programs and encourage dialogue among members of the school community, and each district forms a district working group (DWG) to facilitate districtwide initiatives. Project Com-

mittees made up of representatives from the member schools and colleges give the two consortiums direction. Each project employs a project coordinator, who consults Educators for Social Re-

Fig. 1. Mission Statement

- Educating for Living in a Nuclear Age
Portland, Oregon*
- (1) To help students understand the nature of social and ecological interdependence and their relationship to social justice.
 - (2) To help students develop cooperation and conflict resolution skills.
 - (3) To help students understand current social and political issues in appropriate ways, especially the impact of nuclear technology on the way we think about both local and global issues.
 - (4) To help students participate in democratic decision making about vital contemporary issues.

sponsibility (ESR) for assistance, as needed. The project committee and the project coordinator share responsibility for the activities of the consortium and the needs of the members.

The Work of the Consortia

Consortium activities are aimed at three needs: developing teacher leadership, sharing promising practices, and fostering dialogue on critical social/educational issues. Each project committee has sponsored an annual leadership day for the training of district and school working groups, a "promising practices conference" where teachers can share classroom and schoolwide activities, and meetings with visiting scholars who discuss current issues.

For example, in Portland we hosted Nikolai Nikandrov, Deputy Director of the Soviet Academy of Pedagogics, for a week of meetings with public school and college students, teachers, and professors. Later, Kishore Mandayin of India stayed for a week to share a developing nation's views of ecological issues. And 12 Portland area teachers who attended the Boston ELNA Third Annual "Promising Practices Conference" became the planning team for Portland ELNA's first such conference.

A Cross-District Initiative

Maintaining that global education is most effective when it is accompanied by real communication with people in other countries, teachers in many ELNA districts felt it was important to establish links with schools in other countries.

Because of their interest, several schools in the Portland and Boston ELNA projects will be among the first of six global telecommunication centers in the U.S. With the support of the Copen Family Foundation, this network will enable students in different countries to collaborate on student-initiated projects that meet two criteria: they must (1) be student initiated and (2) address a problem relevant to the health and welfare of the planet.¹

In 1990, the Global Telecommunications Project is establishing direct computer links between students in the U.S., the Soviet Union, Israel, Argentina, Egypt, the Netherlands, and the Philippines. To prepare for this

Social studies teachers are learning new processes for teaching about vital contemporary issues.

effort, Boston ELNA convened a cross-district committee to organize and plan how schools could best utilize these links. The group offered its first telecommunications inservice to 40 teachers in February 1990. Portland ELNA will begin its work with the project during the 1990-91 school year.

The telecommunications program allows classrooms that are situated across oceans to work as though they were across the hall. Through the use of an electronic bulletin board in San Francisco, students communicate with their international classmates via personal computer. They transmit data, proposals, and notes, and carry on dialogues with their compatriots abroad.

This could allow, for example, high school classrooms in Moscow and Portland to collaborate on a study of global warming. Personal computers, satellite transmission, and telephone communications can eliminate proximity as a prerequisite to cooperative learning.

Local Projects

But of course the heart of the ELNA collaboration is the work taking place in local schools. To begin with, the project assists with this work by consulting with local leadership on the assessment of needs.

Needs assessment. To inform their colleagues and invite them to participate in the project, project teachers began designing a needs assessment process to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the entire school's

effort to nurture social responsibility. They asked all teachers to indicate how extensively they included social responsibility issues in their classrooms and how much they would like to pursue these issues further.

This needs assessment process is an example of the blending of process and product that both ELNA projects support. The assessments themselves are the product of collaboration of teachers, administrators, and project staff. And teachers interpret the data and make recommendations for how district policies can be changed to meet their emerging needs.

Social skills. Many project schools are emphasizing the basic social skills of cooperation and conflict resolution. Teachers are redesigning their classroom practices so that students can work in cooperative groups and on cooperative projects. They are also teaching conflict resolution skills that can be applied both to personal conflicts and to social and international conflicts. In certain Portland inner-city schools, teachers have been training groups of students as conflict mediators. In addition, the Portland DWG is developing a set of working papers on conflict resolution that will support ongoing district curriculum and staff development.

Community awareness. In order to nurture helping behaviors and develop civic-mindedness, teachers are involving students in community service programs and environmental action projects, and older students are helping younger students develop their academic and social skills. In one Portland area middle school, for example, teams of students, teachers, and the principal volunteer one day a month at local social service and environmental organizations. In several Boston area high schools, students are participating in new forms of democratic school governance, giving them direct experience in democratic decision-making processes.

Curriculum revisions. Other initiatives focus on embedding social issues and social responsibility into the existing curriculum. In several elementary schools, teachers are implementing an innovative, locally developed model for helping students learn about national and global issues. Middle school mathematics teachers are working on

a curriculum supplement that explores the ways numbers are used, and misused, in the political process. High school science teachers are planning ways to address science-related social issues. High school English teachers are revising their reading assignments so that they can deal more adequately with social and political issues, conflict and its resolution, and individual and group commitment to making a difference. Social studies teachers are learning new processes for teaching students about vital contemporary issues that can enable them to depolarize competing viewpoints, engage in dialogue rather than debate, and understand the complexity of current social and political problems.

Implementation Issues

A project of this magnitude and significance is not without its pitfalls. However, our decision to confront differences of opinion rather than be deterred by these obstacles has taught us many lessons.

1. *The impact of a name.* The word *nuclear* in our name conjures up complicated emotional responses that are not always beneficial for the project. But the time and energy we spend in explaining the meaning of the seven words in our name have educational value. No one can dispute that today's students are living in a nuclear age and are therefore in need of skills appropriate to the era.

2. *Inferred political ideology.* Another problem with our name is that many people presume the ELNA project exists to promote left-wing anti-nuclear ideology. But this concern that we are a political Trojan horse diminishes once people become familiar with our insistence upon multiple perspectives. Nevertheless, the project continues to work aggressively to expand and diversify both the ethnicity and the political orientation of participants. We believe the project cannot promote appreciation of differences if we fail to live by our own credo.

3. *The interdisciplinary focus.* Because we believe that segmenting social responsibility issues into academic disciplines would trivialize the concepts, we have consistently resisted the pressure to categorize the project as either a social studies or a science program. Unfortunately, since most

schools are not organized to accommodate cross-disciplinary endeavors, project teachers have had to continually defend the centrality and importance of project work.

4. *Focus on process as product.* If ELNA were a packaged curriculum that simply had to be disseminated, adopted, and implemented, our work would be a lot easier. However, we believe that school transformation involves more than the mere purchase of packets produced elsewhere. By encouraging teachers and students to become active creators of curriculums rather than mere consumers, we have fostered a process slower and more cumbersome than most educators are accustomed to. We are willing to make haste slowly.

More Than Lip Service

The ultimate test of a project built on participation and empowerment is the perception of the participants. So, here are the words of one Massachusetts teacher in the project:

ELNA helps teachers teach about what's really important in the world today—the environment, justice, war and peace. These are the most important issues and we don't teach about them well. This project helps to close the gap of urgency to teach about these 'fate of the world' issues. It gives kids a chance to face real-world issues and lets them know that it is okay to ask questions and express concerns.

Although there is difficult work ahead, the impact we've already seen is gratifying. For hundreds of teachers and thousands of students, the isolation of classrooms, school boundaries, and even continents is falling away. School is more meaningful to students, and the act of teaching has become more rewarding for teachers. More important, democratic ideals and values, which in the past received mostly lip service, are coming alive in classrooms and schools throughout the project. □

¹The Open Family Foundation is putting together a national network of approximately 10 regional sites to pilot this approach to educational telecommunications.

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