

Growing Up With Options

Brookstown Elementary's Discovery Expeditions help disadvantaged children envision a different future for themselves.

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Most children do not actively decide to sidestep their future duties as employed citizens; yet those who live in crime-ridden neighborhoods where many — perhaps most — adults are on welfare may have trouble even imagining a future vocation for themselves, let alone taking steps to prepare for it. If children are to realize their potential as future citizens and take advantage of occupational opportunities open to them, they must be exposed to a challenging and enlightening curriculum early and consistently (Cavazos 1990). With this in mind, Brookstown Elementary School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, began a new and innovative program designed to introduce poor and disadvantaged children to opportunities outside their ghetto neighborhoods.

The Brookstown staff devised the Discovery Expeditions with the following goals: (1) to address "drop-out" prevention by increasing students' awareness of resources and vocational opportunities in Baton Rouge and other areas in Louisiana; (2) to enrich students' learning experiences in vocabulary, reading, art expression, research, and problem solving; and (3) to involve business

and industry as a support system. These goals were established by an Advisory Council composed of teachers, school support staff, community members, and parents (Brookstown Elementary Action Plan 1990).

Site-Based Planning

The Discovery Expeditions are arranged so that each grade level has an appropriate theme that relates to the social studies/science curriculum. For example, last year the 1st grade social studies curriculum was entitled "All About Me." The Discovery Expedition theme was Recreation and Entertainment. In 2nd grade, the social studies curriculum was "The Community Around Me"; Transportation and Communication was the Discovery Expedition theme. The themes were planned to eliminate repetition in trips from year to year.

Once they established the themes, the grade-level teachers brainstormed and developed ideas of places the students could visit, later researching area businesses to see whether they could accommodate the number and age level of the children. When the teachers had completed the list, they proposed one expedition a month for

each grade level to help children learn about their community. For example, the 5th grade theme was Business and Industry. One month the students visited the Sheraton Hotel, where the public relations staff escorted groups of students around to interview various employees. The chef explained his duties and described his education, and the maid complained that because she had dropped out of school, she now had to stand on a cement floor washing other people's laundry.

Before or after each expedition, teachers invited guest speakers to school to share with the children any special training or education needed for their jobs. They also shared any special benefits or special features of the job and discussed alternative jobs related to the same career field.

When the children returned from their expeditions, they composed stories about their adventures of the day, what they had learned, and how they intended to use their new knowledge. The students entered these stories into a computer during computer class and printed them. After adding illustrations, they placed the stories in a student-made booklet for later reference.

Funding

The Discovery Expeditions Program received no federal or state-mandated funds. The initial costs, such as bus transportation, were paid by a district general fund. Most schools in East Baton Rouge Parish were allowed only two field trips per year due to limited funds; however, because the

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school board recognized the need for such a program for disadvantaged children, it provided more money for the expeditions.

When planning trips, teachers made every effort to avoid any additional costs. If the site had an entry fee or if a bus had to be chartered for an out-of-town trip, the participants had to absorb this cost. Teachers collected the money in small amounts throughout the year. If a child had parental permission to attend an expedition, but could not afford an additional fee, then the campus would pay part or all of the fee from a general fund. Most expeditions did not have an additional cost factor. If they did, the amount was small and could be paid if the parents were informed in advance.

Training

The Discovery Expeditions required no additional teacher training. A regularly scheduled faculty meeting kept everyone advised of the plan and its goals. Most expeditions did require volunteers from the community to serve as chaperones. These volunteers were trained in a group by the principal, or just before a trip, by a teacher. The speakers and businesses were also advised of the goals and objectives of the plan during telephone conversations.

The Discovery Expedition program would not have been successful without community and business involvement. Parents and volunteers served as chaperones. Businesses donated employee time. Speakers from business and industry reinforced students' interest in various occupations. These adults were especially effective if they were from the same racial background as the students. The importance of having a positive adult role model of the same minority group

cannot be disputed (Lincoln and Higgins 1991).

Evaluation

The Discovery Expedition Program has been in effect for two years, and all indicators seem to point toward success in three areas. First, success is observed in site-based management — teachers have been problem finders and problem solvers. Because they felt this to be a worthwhile endeavor, they were willing to organize the expeditions.

Second, students indicate the program is successful. Not only do they eagerly await the expeditions, but because of their experiences, they are also better motivated to learn new material during their regular course work.

Finally, parents rate the expeditions favorably. They approve of the program and enjoy listening to their children's stories when they return from their trips. Parents who attend trips talk with their children about their own jobs and often encourage their children to pursue different careers. Lincoln and Higgins (1991) believe that schools must emphasize building connections to families and communities. Establishing collabora-

tive partnerships among schools, homes, and businesses can dramatically increase the effectiveness of schools in preparing disadvantaged students for a future as contributing citizens.

Preparing for Success

The task of preparing all children for success in school and life is becoming more critical to the nation's future and more difficult to accomplish, yet this is exactly what society is expecting schools to do. By the year 2000, disadvantaged students will make up 39 percent of our school-age population (Lincoln and Higgins 1991).

These disadvantaged children should not be penalized for their economic status, nor should they be stereotyped as unintelligent. Administrators, teachers, and business leaders must use many strategies to encourage them to achieve to their full potential. The Discovery Expedition Program is a useful strategy that will successfully stimulate a future for the disadvantaged student. "Each child offers a unique and precious gift: let us ensure that not one gift is wasted" (Cavazos 1991). □

References

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