

Students get real-life lessons in magnet school's micro-society

By Jessica Harding
Tuesday, March 17, 2009

AMSTERDAM — He's only in third grade, but Michael Machold has the power to give kids tickets, send them to court, even put them in jail.

Machold is a peacekeeper in the Barkley Microsociety. When he's working, he wears a bright orange sash and patrols the hallways with his notebook making sure that all the students obey the laws of the society.

Machold, who said he might want to be a police officer when he grows up, had to interview for his position with the chief of police, another student at Barkley Microsociety Magnet School. He gets a salary, which is set by the legislature, an elected body made up of students. Each week he can bring his check to the bank, which is run by a group of students, and can use the money he earns to buy goods and services at the various business ventures managed by students.

The Greater Amsterdam School District has converted all of the elementary schools to magnet schools; Barkley was one of the last to switch over.

In its first year, Barkley Microsociety is encouraging students to use their education in a practical way. They are learning how to write checks, save money, run businesses, manage employees and work hard.

Each Monday and Thursday, Barkley students spend the last hour of the school day either working or shopping.

Unlike the real world, there is nearly 100 percent employment at Barkley Microsociety, although the students can be fired or quit their jobs.

There is an elected president and her cabinet, along with various elected legislators, who represent each of Barkley's grades — pre-kindergarten through fifth. The society's laws, pay scale and tax rate are determined by the legislature.

Ericha Engle, a fourth-grader, represents the pre-kindergarteners. She said they are very into "going green" right now and they are working on a recycling program.

Monday was Engle's "discovery" day, which means she was not working and had the ability to cash her check and go shopping.

At Barkley those in the public sector — the legislators — make between \$14 and \$18 per hour for a two-hour week. Managers make about \$16 and workers make \$4. Taxes are deducted when checks are cashed.



Gazette Photographer: Barry Sloan
Special education teacher Cindy Flanagan helps kindergarten student Raquel Person shop for jewelry in the Barkley Microsociety at Barkley Elementary School in Amsterdam on Monday.

Because there isn't enough money for workers to spend at various business ventures, business owners are having a difficult time repaying their loans to the bank and the society is in jeopardy of going bankrupt, said Nancy Rad, magnet coordinator at Barkley.

Those in the business community met Monday to discuss what to do about the situation and decided to write letters to their legislators complaining about the unfair pay scale.

Jennifer Mondalek, a consultant for Microsociety Inc., the nonprofit organization that helps implement the microsociety theme in various schools across the country, said Barkley is doing well for its first year. Mondalek, who is from Michigan, was visiting Barkley on Monday to help fix various problems and meet with the faculty and students.

"This is how life is," Mondalek said. "The students learn that they can only spend what they earn and given this economy, that's a good lesson to learn."

On the adult side, the microsociety is monitored by a leadership team made up of various Barkley faculty members. In the future, the leadership team could consist of parents, board members and teachers, Rad said.

Almost any problem that could come up in real life comes up in a microsociety, Rad said.

Kristina DeCrescenzo, a fourth-grade teacher and the facilitator of the state History Museum, a business venture managed by fourth-grader Raylee Simone, was one of the faculty members who attended various microsociety schools throughout the country in preparation for Barkley to become a microsociety magnet school.

DeCrescenzo said she was most impressed with how well spoken and confident the students are. "They had excellent public speaking skills, which is crucial today," she said.

The microsociety model has been around since the late 1960s and has spread across the country, but Barkley is one of only a few microsociety schools in New York and the only one in the upstate region. The closest other schools are in Yonkers and Connecticut.

Mondalek said the model helps increase a student's confidence level because a student who may not be so good at traditional school may excel at his role within the microsociety.

"There are so many opportunities for leadership in so many different ways," she said.

Cassandra Robataille is the microsociety's president, elected by her peers. Robataille said she wants to be a prosecutor when she grows up and intends to keep rising up the ranks until she is a judge. She said she listens to a lot of problems and complaints and meets every week with the other members of the legislature to pass various laws and regulations.

"I love it," she said. "It's good experience."