

MicroSociety helps kids put skills into practice

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"I've got to go or I'll be late for work." That's something we're not surprised to hear adults say, but a third-grader?

Gwinn Gibbs, principal at Discovery School, wasn't surprised at all. Students there, a *MicroSociety* school, take their responsibilities seriously.

Three afternoons each week, the school's MicroDays, students spend about an hour working at their businesses, running the government, or keeping the peace. Once a month students get to spend their hard-earned micro dollars at Kid City businesses and attractions.

Kid City is Discovery School's *MicroSociety* town.

Kristin Ross, who teaches kindergarten and first grade, says that MicroDays are particularly exciting for her students. "For our little guys, the end of the day can be rough. They are tired, hungry, just ready to get home. At the end of the day on Micro Days the kids come alive."

Gibbs says the whole idea is to prepare students for the real world. "The *MicroSociety* concept adds relevance to school. The students see why they are learning math, English and social studies because they use what they learn in class when they go to work."

Businesses include a greeting card company, origami shop, a catering service, jewelry stores, a cleaning service, a variety store, and a technology company. There are about 15 businesses in all.

In addition to its retail and service businesses, Kid City has a bank, a university, a museum, a post office, a newspaper, peacekeepers (law enforcement), a warehouse, a library, a recreational facility and, of course, a local government.

At Discovery's recent MicroNight, the public was invited to learn about the *MicroSociety* concept and sample the wares of Kid City companies. Students greeted their customers with a handshake and eagerly explained how their companies were set up. They also used their best salesmanship skills to promote their products.

The Dotted Crane, the origami business, was started by a student of Japanese descent. She wanted to acquaint others with Japanese traditions. The business plan was written, loan secured from the bank, salaries and job duties decided. Then the post office delivered a letter from the government outlining the taxes they would pay. It was back to the drawing board and, in the end, all employees had to take a pay cut. Dotted Crane employees are paid equally, because they share equally the responsibilities of running the business.

E&H&K Stuff, a greeting card company, isn't worried, even though it's getting some competition. Another card company is opening soon. E&H&K owner Katelyn Doyle, a sixth-grader, says that they plan to improve their product (one employee is going to work on

handwriting skills), make their product unique, and maybe lower prices. They're doing well enough to give employees a raise.

Will the *MicroSociety* concept improve ISTEP scores? A recent third-party showed that all of the *MicroSociety* schools evaluated had improved scores on standardized tests. Another study showed that the longer the *MicroSociety* concept is in place, the more scores improve. Other studies showed similar results.

But much of what these students learn can't be measured in a grade book or with a standardized test.

This is Kid City's second year. Gibbs says that students and staff learned a lot that first year.

"The manufacturing businesses learned very quickly that they had to make quality products or they wouldn't have any repeat business," Gibbs said. "This year the businesses emphasize quality, take pride in their products and have been rewarded with increased sales."

Kid City's goal to mirror the real world sometimes includes harsh realities many small business owners face today.

At a recent business meeting, Kid City Newspaper staff realized that after the next payroll, there would be no money left in their account. Beth Makovic, their adviser, tells how they solved their financial dilemma. "First they discussed raising advertising rates or the cost of the newspaper, but decided if they did that, they wouldn't sell any papers. They then realized that an employee had just resigned and that would help, but not enough.

"That was when Maia Vanbuskirk, the fifth-grader who owns the paper, said she would take a pay cut (down to minimum wage) to help the paper out. The managers were also told they would have to take pay cuts in order to make the paper profitable. The group was not happy, but decided once they had two good sales periods in a row, they could have a raise."

The newspaper staff left the meeting determined to produce a newspaper that more people would want to read so they could sell more papers.

Makovic says that, as a teacher, this situation provided her with a wonderful opportunity to discuss how businesses all over the U.S. are facing similar situations. "By having these connections through *Micro*, the students not only better understand the financial crisis in the United States, but they also have empathy for those affected," Makovic said.

First-grade teacher Stephanie Talbot agrees, "Micro is an unbelievable way to help the kids to understand how a society works, why we have rules and laws, and why learning is so important."

Other Discovery teachers echo these sentiments. Fifth-grade teacher Kristl Ord, a strong proponent of the *MicroSociety* concept says, "There are students who may struggle in school, yet become some of our brightest citizens in Kid City."

Kid City Constitution, written by the students, is much like the U.S. Constitution. It describes the duties of the three branches of government, sets rules for elections, and spells out qualifications for office holders (the treasurer has to be a fifth-grader with an A in math and the secretary has to have good handwriting). There are provisions for amending the constitution and filling vacant offices. Term limits are also part of the Constitution. The president and vice-president can't serve more than one year consecutively.

Next year this concept will be moved to the Elizabeth Starr Academy and will be housed in what is now Starr Elementary School. Gibbs and Starr Principal Stephanie Quinn and their staffs, in addition to teaching the three Rs, will work together to spark the entrepreneurial spirit in their students while teaching them skills for the 21st century.

Current students at both Starr and Discovery are given preference in enrolling in the new school and must do so by Wednesday. After that, students from any other school within the district may apply.