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BUILDING A SOCIETY

School introduces pupils to marketplace realities

BY DANA HULL
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At the cafeteria at James Madison Elementary School in San Leandro, 8- and 9-year-olds frantically dash from table to table buying homemade wares - wrapping paper, origami swans, Rice Krispie treats - with their school's "currency."

Students at the school pay "rent" for their desks with school money, form governments, start businesses and develop arts and culture organizations. Each student also works at a "job" at a mock bank, store or post office.

James Madison is one of 250 "MicroSociety" schools across the country. The non-prom MicroSociety Inc. encourages children to create a microcosm of the real world inside their school, and each student has a role in it.

"We think it is a really wonderful program." said Rick Rubino, the principal at James Madison. "Our purpose in adopting MicroSociety was getting the kids truly engaged in what they are learning. Too often, kids don't see a connection between math and real life. But now we have students acting as bankers and starting their own recycling agencies."

MicroSociety Inc. - a Philadelphia-based organization with eight full-time members - is

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rogram puts math renal-world context

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ed through grants and private tions, and provides training technical assistance to clemen- schools that have adopted the rani. Some are magnet schools, e are charter schools and in e cases teachers just weave Mi- ociet.y concepts into lessons.

vo other lay Area schools have ntly adopted the full MicroSo- program: the City of Franklin •oSoc.iety Magnet School in celey and the Willow Oaks Mi- ociety School in Menlo Park.

n our case, it's a magnet.)ol," said Irving Phillips, director iagnet schools for Berkeley lini- "It gives students responsibilit- gives them the opportunity to -eal-life experience and practice kinds of things they are learning ie classroom."

ipetitive skills

upport.ers of the program say it hes kids the skills they'll need to ipete in today s work environ- it. But. others worry that it intro- es capitalism to children at too y an age.

understand that some parents concerns," said Rubino. "But italism isn't; the focus. They are ping about. cooperation, collabo- mn, team work, survival skills saving money. We don't teach n anything that they don't need know to survive in the real ld."

[any students at. James Madison, ch has 270 pupils in grades K-5, I they love the program, which is s second year. Though MicroSo- y simply augments their regular ;s time, each said they look for-

Erit ep eneur Tristan Silva, 11, shrugs off questions from potential buyers during a MicroSociety session at James Madison Elementary School in San Leandro,

ward to the "market days" when their crafts are sold. Others said they have also begun to think about careers they'd like to explore later in life.

"I t ink we're learning how the world really works," said Zachary Guardiancic, who is "10-going-on-11" and serves in the student legislature.

Though Zachary lost his recent hid for the presidency, his picture graces the school's \$1 bill."

The fun part. is that when you are ruining for office you have to talk. You have to make a whole speech in front of the school, just like Bill Clinton. And everybody has to register to vote," he said.

Founder's vision

Program founder Dr. George Richmond, who taught elementary school in Brooldyn before going on to get his doctorate in education at Harvard, said he continues to be awed by how creative the students are. He added that girls are often ill positions of power in MicroSociety schools.

One of his favorite anecdotes is of a school near San Diego that decid-

ed years ago to have a monarchy, complete with a 10-year-old queen.

"I flew out to California to visit the school and when I got off the plane all the children were there," Richmond said. "Waiting at the end of the runway is a little blond girl wearing long emerald robes. She introduced me to her prime minister and her press secretary. I bowed to her, and then she took me to a waiting limousine."

At Madison's recent holiday bazaar, students seemed already well attuned to today :s conunerical culture.

Tristan Silva's booth was constantly mobbed by friends. Tristan, 11, who recently immigrated to the East Bay from Russia, was selling a game that he'd created - with pieces sold separately.

"Tristan, how much are these?" "What are they?"

A crowd of young faces looked to the fifth-grader for answers. He calmly explained that the figurines were "buy four, get one free." He kept a careful eye out for thieves, and examined every MicroSociety bill for possible counterfeiting.

"This is fun," Tristan said. "But I think next time I want to sell some-

thing different. I draw really well, and if I make cards I think people-will buy them."

Togetherness benefit

Teachers at Madison said they feel the. MicroSociety program has brought an increased SCIISe of conn- munity to the school, which is racially diverse: 25 percent white, 25 percent Asian and 25 percent. Latino, with Filipino and African American students as well. Students form friendships based on common interests and the jobs they hold.

"At the marketplace, it doesn't matter who you are," said John, Stevens, a fifth-grade teacher, as he surveyed the chaos of the cafeteria. "Everyone is negotiating sales and haggling over prices. There is a lot of learning going on in this room that doesn't show up on the standardized test."

For more i.nfai-maticm, visit MicroSociety on the Web at www.microsociety.org

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