

A DIFFERENT WAY TO LEARN

WELCOME TO MYERSVILLE



Photos by J. KYLE KEENER/Detroit Free Press

Brianna Howard, 8, and DeLvia Rice, 10, both of Taylor, work in the Myersville post office. In the Microsociety program, the school becomes a microcosm of society, allowing children to see how what they learn in school relates to real life.

At Taylor school, students run stores, hold court, raise grades

By LORI HIGGINS
FREE PRESS EDUCATION WRITER

The impeached senator couldn't have been surprised. Just a month before, the president was ousted after a scrape with a younger student in which she slapped the little girl.

So when the senator hit a student who stepped on his coat, of course his fellow lawmakers gave him the boot.

"They were doing the wrong thing. They could have solved it a different way," said fifth-grader Chantiara Morris, 9, the chairperson of the Legislature.

"They wanted to be senators so bad. But they learned what not to do."

This is life in Myersville, where students are the lawmakers, business managers, postal workers, newspaper reporters and university instructors. They create the laws. They punish the lawbreakers. They earn paychecks. And they pay taxes.

Myersville is a community created at Myers

Elementary School in Taylor as part of a school reform effort called Microsociety, where schools become microcosms of society. The idea is that students get to apply what they learn in the classroom to every-day, real-life experiences. That way, what they learn in the classroom means more to them.

And at Myers, where hallways have street names, where student cops patrol the hallways as peacekeepers and where anyone who works for the court system must pass a "bar" exam, the Legislature is all powerful. In this body, integrity reigns.

"The last place you want to be judged is in front of these kids. They are very serious," said Karen Hickmott, the Microsociety coordinator at Myers.

As for the impeachments, "what really cooked their bacon was the fact that in both instances, the students refused to accept responsibility or acknowledge that what they did was

TALKING ABOUT A CONSTITUTION

The Myersville Constitution is an eight-page document with this preamble:

"We, the citizens of Myersville, in order to insure the best education possible, a peaceful and safe environment, the promotion of lifelong guidelines and life skills and the securing of a better future for Myers students filled with the blessings of freedom, do establish this constitution for Myersville."

Students learn lessons for real world

wrong," said Hickmott, a former teacher.

Microsociety is a complete redesign of a school, rather than a program, because "it creates a different kind of school," principal Suzanne Downing said. It's among many steps Myers Elementary has taken in its quest to improve student performance.

With about 550 students, Myers is one of nearly 70 Michigan schools forced to restructure because it has failed to meet state and federal academic goals for five years.

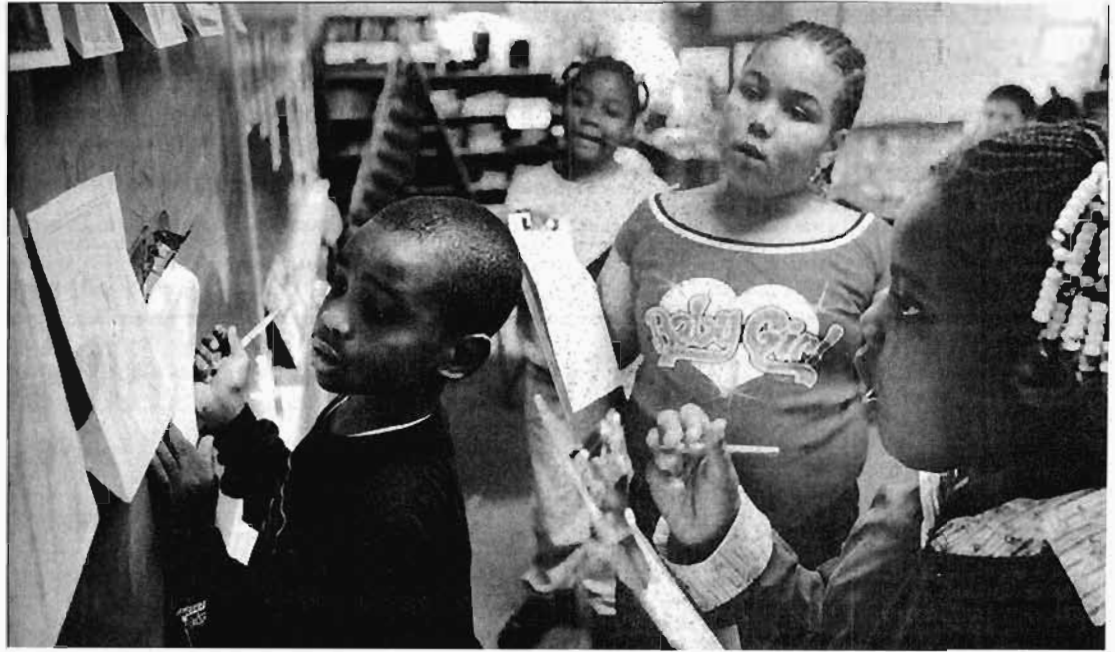
But while many of the other schools are replacing principals and offering more teacher training, Myers is taking a comprehensive approach. Part of that is the addition of Microsociety, a program that is being used in at least 250 schools nationwide. There are five in Michigan, including one in Detroit. There is evidence, both at Myers and at other Microsociety schools, that it's making a difference.

Myers is in its third full year with the program, and student performance on the MEAP has improved significantly. In fourth-grade math, for instance, the percentage of students who met or exceeded state standards improved from 20 percent in the 2001-02 school year to 56 percent in 2003-04.

Similar gains on separate standardized tests have been seen in Microsociety schools nationwide.

Philip Hawkins, senior vice president of the Microsociety program, which is based in Philadelphia, said part of the reason is that "kids become really engaged in the educational process. And because they're engaged, they come to school."

Students learn in traditional classes much of the day, and from 2 to 3 p.m. daily, they report to work. The duties vary from day to day. Mondays are business days, and are spent preparing for the week. Tuesdays are production days.



At the Myersville post office, DeLvia Rice, 10, Brianna Howard, 8, Tamy Evans, 9, and Dazhane Eutmon, 8, all of Taylor, try to decide which student-designed stamps will be used in Myersville.

And Wednesdays through Fridays are consumer days, when the stores and agencies are open for business. For example, the post office is responsible for sorting mail within the school and delivering it to the citizens. Each student has an address (their desk).

To make the program work, teachers receive extensive training. Hickmott said two national trainers visit five times a year to work with teachers. Some Myers staff members also have attended national conferences.

Fourth-grader Tamy Evans, 9, sought a job as assistant postmaster for the community post office because "I work real hard and I believe that I can help students do things," she said.

Microsociety, Tamy said, "gets you ready for the future. If you have a job here, you can have a job when you grow up and you'll already have experience," she said during a break in the workday recently, which saw postal employees voting on which stamps they'll use.

Across the hall at the Art Institute, the floor was lined with murals the students were commissioned to create for various businesses and other art projects. Co-manager Ashleah Burns, a fourth-grader, is in charge of making sure employees get their work done.

Chantiara, the senator who chairs the Legislature, is among the most experienced at Microsociety because a previous elementary school she attended, Davison Elementary in Detroit, also used the program. Her duties extend beyond the Legislature, housed in teacher Ursula Sliwka's fourth-grade portable classroom.

Chantiara also is a leader and role model in the classroom.

"When she leaves the classroom, I'll help control the class and stuff," Chantiara said of her teacher.

In Myersville, everyone must hold a job, and the minimum wage is 5 micros an hour. Each micro — green bills made from construction paper — is equivalent to a U.S. dollar. Salaries can start at 5 micros an hour and go up to 20 micros an hour. Students use the micros to shop at the community's stores, to pay fines and to pay taxes.

And just like in the real world, Myersville has a Chamber of Commerce, made up of managers of all the businesses.

There is a university, where

students teach popular classes on bookkeeping and financial management. There is a large warehouse, where every business must purchase its materials.

And there is a court system in which all Myersville residents — including teachers — must serve on juries.

A Myersville Constitution governs the land, and like the U.S. Constitution, it has been amended many times to keep up with the times. A recent addition was an amendment outlawing panhandling. Why? Some older students were observed begging younger students for money in the hallways.

"It is really amazing. It is a real world in miniature," Hickmott said.

It's a real world in which students pay fines if they're caught speeding (running in the hallways). Or, they perform community service, which can include reading to a kindergarten student. The fines and community service are a typical way of punishing students who have violated the rules.

You name it, it's probably happened in Myersville. One student couldn't resist the temptation of stealing from the bank. He was charged with bank robbery. Another student was charged with forgery after she created her own version of the micro money. Her caper would have worked were it not for one major flaw.

"The only problem was her green paper was white on the other side," Hickmott said.



Myers Elementary students set up businesses like the Art Institute of Myersville, which designed this poster, and a school travel agency.