

# Educational Leadership

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*Challenging*  
the Status Quo



# Building a MicroSociety

*Elementary school students connect learning to life in this hands-on program.*

## **Sheryl Dunton**

**T**his afternoon at Talbot Hill, a business owner concentrates as he calculates the profits of recent sales, graphing them on a spreadsheet to determine whether new advertisements on the local TV station have bumped up consumer interest. Across the hall, management trainees attend a

seminar to discuss the qualities of effective leaders. At the Talbot Bank a few doors down, a loan officer considers an application for a new business loan. At the Hall of Justice, a judge briefs a group of citizens on the intricacies of jury duty. At still another location, employees of the Tech Tigers company are brainstorming ideas for a multimedia presentation for prospective school-community partners.

This is a typical day at Talbot Hill Elementary School, a Title I school in Renton, Washington, 20 minutes southeast of Seattle. In recent years, ethnic diversity among the school's 500 students has grown rapidly: Currently, 34 percent of students are white, 33 percent are Asian, 19 percent are black,

13 percent are Hispanic, and 1 percent are American Indian.

Talbot follows the MicroSociety model, a hands-on learning program that enables students to apply classroom skills in real-life ways. My 13 years of experience working in this innovative school (first as the MicroSociety program director and then as principal) have convinced me that students thrive when we respect their need to connect learning with life.

## **The MicroSociety Model**

In 1967, George Richmond was a new teacher in a public school in Brooklyn, New York. To make learning more relevant and engaging for his unruly 5th grade students, Richmond transformed



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TALBOT HILL ELEMENTARY

his classroom into a miniature society with its own simulated economy. He later expanded this concept into an approach called MicroSociety.<sup>1</sup>

The MicroSociety philosophy acknowledges that students learn best when they connect schoolwork with the outside world. The following core principles guide the program: promoting student voice and choice, enabling students to learn by doing, taking advantage of students' entrepreneurial spirit, providing real-world experiences, enabling teachers to serve as facilitators, sharing responsibility and authority among teachers and students, and engaging community partners as contributors to the program.

The model has now spread to more than 250 schools in 40 states, which are networked together by the nonprofit organization MicroSociety, Inc. Although every MicroSociety school implements a simulated economy and civic structure that reflect the core principles, the staff and students at each school have the flexibility to creatively build their own society.

### Talbot's MicroSociety Program

Talbot began implementing MicroSociety in several classrooms in 1993 and expanded the program to the entire

building during the next two years. Every year, we continue to tweak the program to meet new needs and build on our experience.

### Contributing to a Thriving Economy

Three afternoons each week, every student in our school participates in a for-profit business, a government agency, or a nonprofit organization. Students in grades K–2 work on their

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MicroSociety activities with their home-room teachers in their classrooms. Students in grades 3–5 go either to their jobs in various existing organizations or to the small businesses that they have launched as entrepreneurs. A few of the organizations that students can choose to work for follow.

■ *The Mad Scientists* conduct science investigations and then create science presentations and products for other students. For one project, this group studied rockets, created and sold paper

rockets, and then instructed students in how to launch them.

■ *Eye of the Tiger*, the school newspaper, employs students as reporters, photographers, sales managers, and editors to report on events at the school. Like newspapers in the adult world, *Eye of the Tiger* sells both subscriptions and single issues.

■ *The Art Explosion's* employees learn about various artists and artistic styles and then produce and sell their own artwork. These students also create museum-like exhibits for the school and hire themselves out as assistants for art projects.

■ *The Talbot Internal Revenue Service* manages the Tiger Warehouse, the school wholesale store where students buy supplies for their products, and keeps the school's tax accounts. Student for-profit businesses pay a 30 percent business tax, and nonprofit employees pay individual income tax.

If students choose to start a new business rather than join an existing organization, they must create a mission statement, a business plan, and an operating budget and submit them to City Hall (another student-run agency) for approval. An example of a student-created small business is the Tiger Cubs, which creates products related to Talbot's tiger mascot, such as faux-fur tiger-striped pillows and travel

pillows. After obtaining the necessary business licenses, each new business develops its products or services. Businesses sell their products during afternoon MicroSociety periods and at the schoolwide MicroSociety Marketplace, which we currently hold several times a year. All transactions use Talbot's currency, called Cool Cash.

Students learn many financial and life lessons by operating their own businesses. They are responsible for purchasing supplies through the wholesale store, creating original products, and selling and marketing those products. They are also responsible for keeping track of sales and taxes.

How do we prepare students to participate in this sophisticated and complex mini-economy? September of every school year is Micro Academy time. In their home classrooms, students get an intensive orientation on the basic concepts they need to be able to function in the MicroSociety, including citizenship responsibilities, economics (for example, banking and financial management), and government processes. At our October job fair, students choose their preferred activities, fill out job applications, and are hired. Teachers act as facilitators for each student organization, training students in their specific jobs and gradually diminishing their role as students grow into leadership.

### **Participating in the Democratic Process**


Citizenship in a democratic society is a cornerstone of the MicroSociety. At each fall's primary and general elections, students elect their student government, which consists of a House of Representatives (one student from each classroom); a Senate (two students from each grade level); a president (who presides over the House of Representatives); and a vice president (who

presides over the Senate).

During our September Micro Academy time, teachers introduce students to Talbot's student government structure, engage them in classroom discussions of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and teach them about the voter registration process. Teachers create classroom voter registration rosters, which are available during recess so that students can sign up to vote. Approximately 95 percent of students consistently register to vote.

In October, candidates create their platforms and conduct campaigns. Students participate enthusiastically; usually, about 230 students run for office in the primaries. Candidates in

## StatusQuote



**We know what we are, but know not what we may be. — William Shakespeare**

the general election give speeches at community meetings, and students also produce a voter pamphlet with pictures of the candidates and a PowerPoint presentation that runs continuously on our closed-circuit television. The time frame for the election campaigns coincides with the schedule of local, state, and federal elections, allowing students to connect their own experiences with those of their parents, who may be participating in elections in the adult world.

Once elected, the student government meets weekly and considers students' suggestions for needed laws. We keep suggestion sheets available throughout the school. As in the U.S. government, the House and Senate deliberate on proposed bills, and any bills passed by those bodies go on to the president for a signature or a veto. For example,

■ Students complained that products for sale were being copied in the

Marketplace, and suggested that Talbot needed to create a system to protect innovation and creativity. In response, the student government created a patent office, which now grants patents to businesses that create original products.

■ After one student complained that his mail had disappeared from his mailbox in the student post office (located in the library), the student government passed a law against opening other students' mail or tampering with the mailboxes.

■ One student organization that was making and selling food products studied regulations governing food workers in the real world. These students suggested that everyone who handles food during MicroSociety should be required to pass a food handler's test each year. After the law was passed, these students wrote the tests.

Another vital component of Talbot's government is the Hall of Justice, where students act as judges, lawyers, and juries to deal with their peers who break laws. Students apply for a job as a judge or lawyer as they would any other position in the MicroSociety, but they must also pass a bar exam demonstrating their knowledge of how the judicial system works—for example, the steps in preparing a legal brief. One of our teachers who formerly worked as an attorney wrote our bar exam.

Most cases that go to the Hall of Justice are related to ticket hearings, where students contest tickets received for such infractions as running in the hallways. All cases contested between students go through student mediation, and only proceed to trial if this process fails. For example, in one case a student had borrowed Cool Cash from another student and the two disagreed on how much was owed.

A more serious case involved a student who had embezzled money

from the student bank. The student claimed innocence, and the case went to trial. On the basis of overwhelming evidence, the court found him guilty. In addition to losing his job, he was sentenced to perform community service and to repay the money by having his paychecks garnished for a certain period of time.

### **Academic Connections**

In the MicroSociety program, students apply the academic skills they learn in their classrooms in meaningful ways that provide immediate rewards. As one Talbot student proudly announced, “Now I know why I need to understand how to do percentages. It’s to figure out taxes.” Classroom teachers take every opportunity to reinforce these connections.

Many people ask whether the program is best suited for special education students, gifted students, or other students. The answer is, all of them! At Talbot, many special education students who struggle in their academic classes successfully manage their own companies. Gifted students have met new challenges, such as making a business partnership work or learning how to collaborate with fellow students to solve problems.

One of the most validating undertakings the Talbot staff has accomplished is to align the MicroSociety program with Washington State’s standards, referred to as the Essential Academic Learning Requirements. Washington teachers, like those in many other states, often feel overwhelmed when they look at everything that they are supposed to teach under state mandate. MicroSociety provides a natural structure to integrate curriculum and focus learning.

As part of their yearly planning, Talbot teachers identify the academic standards that each student organization will address and create rubrics that student participants will use to self-assess. For example, creating scripts for

Talbot’s KATS TV station integrates state reading, writing, and communication standards, not to mention technology, teamwork, and problem solving. Students who run businesses work toward achieving math standards as they create payrolls—calculating the number of hours employees work, times their pay rate, less their income tax, and then putting the data into spreadsheets to track and submit to the bank.

**“At a regular school, you’re just waiting for that bell to ring. But here, time just flies by.”**

Talbot has made technology a focus during the last several years. Every part of the MicroSociety has a technology component. For example, the student bank maintains records of all accounts by computer, and Hall of Justice employees maintain computerized records of traffic tickets. The KATS TV station uses computers to word process scripts and to produce videos. One student business, the Tech Tigers, manages the computer lab and assists with technology troubleshooting and projects.

### **Challenges of the Program**

The MicroSociety model demands exceptional commitment from teachers, who must take on such tasks as guiding elementary students in the development of their own business or preparing student judges and lawyers for trials. Expanded staff development and time for teacher collaboration are crucial. In addition to the annual four and one-half days of staff development time provided by the school district, Talbot “banks” five minutes a day to get an additional five days per year. Teachers have 45 minutes every day to work together in grade-level teams. We also hold curriculum development and

goal-setting retreats.

In a model that centers on empowering students, it is essential to encourage leadership at all levels of the organization, from administrators to teachers to paraprofessionals to parents. The bulk of the school’s decision making is carried out in ongoing teacher work groups. The chair of each work group participates on a school site council that deals with concerns raised by the work groups.

Another ongoing challenge—the lack of adequate resources—has led to amazing opportunities. Because school district funds do not cover all the extra costs of the program, Talbot has applied for and received many grants and awards from such entities as the Boeing Company, Social Venture Partners—Seattle, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Blue Ribbon Schools of Excellence, and Intel’s 21st Century Schools of Distinction program. Additional support comes from a nonprofit organization, Talbot Hill Educational Trust, made up of staff, parents, and community members who help guide and fund-raise for the school.

In addition to financial support, we have developed in-kind partnerships with local businesses and organizations. The notion that elementary students are receiving excellent preparation to function as future productive citizens appeals to community figures and business leaders. One such partnership is with retired judge Robert McBeth, who comes every year to swear in new government officials at our student government inauguration. He stays to work with the students in the Talbot court, leading them through a mock trial and discussing the fine points of the judicial process.

## Making a Difference

Student academic achievement at Talbot continues to grow. On last year's Washington Assessment of Student Learning, for example, our students' scores improved 14.3 percent in math and 11.6 percent in reading beyond the 2004 scores, far exceeding our adequate yearly progress goals of 6 percent and 4 percent respectively.

The goals of the MicroSociety approach, however, go far beyond increasing academic achievement. At Talbot we have also found that the program positively affects student empowerment, application of real-world skills, and technology skills. Jodi Newman, a University of Washington doctoral student, has helped us collect data for the last few years from a variety of sources, including student and parent focus groups, surveys, and student work. The results have revealed

that students not only believe that they can make a difference, but are also willing to demonstrate it. Moreover, the longer students have been at Talbot, the more strongly they believe in their ability to improve their own lives and community.

Through our surveys and focus groups, we ask parents about their impressions of the program and what their children tell them about school. One parent recently noted,

I volunteer at school a lot, so I have seen what Micro means to students. I believe wholeheartedly in the MicroSociety program. I have seen children in the classroom who don't talk to the other students and just sit quietly by themselves all day, and then go to their Micro business and blossom into new people. They talk to others and enjoy so much what they are doing. They are learning math, reading, and writing, but in a way that makes them really connect.

Perhaps the best endorsement of the MicroSociety program can be found in the words of one student:

I've been to four schools, so I would know what schools are fun and what schools aren't. And Talbot Hill is the best one I've ever been to, because it has so many other things to do besides just going to school. When you go to a regular school, you're just waiting for that bell to ring. But here, time just flies by. **EL**

<sup>1</sup>Richmond, G. (1973/1997). *The MicroSociety school: A real world in miniature*. New York: Harper & Row.

*Author's note:*Carolynn King-Richmond, President and CEO of MicroSociety, Inc., provided support in the writing of this article. More information about MicroSociety® is available at [www.microsociety.org](http://www.microsociety.org).

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