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Life in Micro

If you want to know how children would run the world, look no further than the classroom.

In schools throughout Florida, thanks to MICRO SOCIETY, Inc. children K-12 are creating their own miniature societies drafting laws, operating banks, running postal systems and serving as CEOs of their own successful businesses. And they are teaching us a lot.

IT'S NINE IN THE MORNING and downtown Huskyville is bustling. Citizens, young and old alike, are shopping, selling, keeping the peace. The door to the quilt shop is wide open and a peek inside reveals a dozen or so seamstresses and tailors working hard, singing "Let it sew, let it sew, let it sew" while creating one-of-a-kind pillows guaranteed to be big sellers for Mother's Day, which is right around the corner.

Down at Husky Union Bank, they're seeing a steady flow of customers keeps the calculators humming, and just past the gazebo, where citizens sit reading and playing, the cleverly named "Barkery" is doing steady business, selling its unique puppy treats to all the dog owners in town.

And earlier in the day, Judge Shawn, appointed about a month ago, presided over a theft case in Husky Court, with

no less than four witnesses testifying. Even in quaint Huskyville, it seems, there is no escape from commotion. "There is always a certain amount of drama going on," says the Judge.

By any estimation, it looks like just another day in the bustling commercial and social life of small town America. In many ways, it is. Then again, in many ways, it's not. You see,

every citizen of Huskyville, including Judge Shawn, happens to be a student at College Park Elementary School. Husky currency, while valuable, is not minted by the U.S. Treasury. The storefronts on the square are not stores at all, but portable classrooms out by the school's playgrounds and basketball courts. Huskyville may not be a "real" town, but it is something very, very close: a MicroSociety.

"IT BEGAN IN 1967. That year I found myself in a 5th grade classroom cornered by 33 barely literate 10-year-olds. Despite my best efforts to teach them to read and write, they just weren't interested. Too many teachers and substitute teachers had tried and failed them... "I asked myself a question: If they aren't interested in what I want them to do, what are they interested in doing?"

So begins George Richmond's story, as documented in his book "The MicroSociety School: A Real World in Miniature." In the 10 years it took Richmond to develop the *MicroSociety*® program, he nurtured the vision of a school that was a society in miniature, complete with banks, stores, real estate holdings, schools and its own money — a place where children would be "taking charge of their own education, acquiring the skills, confidence and creativity they would need to become productive and responsible citizens of the adult world."

What started out as a game, much like Monopoly, eventually blossomed into a groundbreaking educational strategy that combines school curriculum with real-world experiences that accelerate learning, instill self-confidence and advance student achievement. By allowing students to create their own society from scratch, school suddenly becomes real for students as they operate in-class businesses, maintain peace and order in the community and hold civic elections.

"You need to see ambition in children. They must understand from an

early age about the value of hard work and earning your own way," says Carolyn King, Richmond's wife, partner and MICRO SOCIETY's executive director.

It's easy to forget that not too long ago children did authentic work — on the farm, in the family business and in the home. Their contributions were essential and valued. Today, however, adults and children alike have come to define childhood as an extended period of recreation. Is it any wonder, then, that our children have become the newest "leisure" class?

From charter and church affiliated schools to public schools and after school programs, MICRO SOCIETY is making an impact across Florida.

In a Micro program, each student returns to those meaningful roots. The choices they make are crucial to the success of their businesses or public-sector agencies, as well as to the general health of the miniature community. To boot, their education suddenly has meaning. They use math in their "careers" as bankers, entrepreneurs, and builders of innovative products, and even at tasks that they wouldn't ordinarily learn until later in life, like balancing their checkbooks. Chemistry, biology and other hard sciences help students apply creative solutions to real-world issues like public green spaces, like Huskyville Square, and recycling, and to develop, incidentally, highly marketable products.

Yet, perhaps the most significant difference that occurs is, as Richmond himself discovered in 1967, that kids actually want to be in school.

Richmond's initial experiment has now been repeated in hundreds of schools

in over 40 states, students applying what they learn in the classroom in the morning to their "jobs" in the afternoon. And the proof, as they say, is in the pudding.

In nearby Brooksville, Florida, where Chocachatti Elementary implemented the *MicroSociety* program in 1999 (where first graders who began the program at its inception at the school graduated this year), office referrals dropped by 69 percent, and suspensions dropped by 44 percent. The school earned an "A" from the Florida Department of Education and won the Florida Alliance Arts Achievement Award. A 2003 study of all schools implementing multi-year programs revealed an average score increase across all grades of 14 percent in reading and 21 percent in math, far exceeding the "Adequate Yearly Progress" requirements of "No Child Left Behind." In some schools, student scores have risen by up to 53 percent!

But *MicroSociety* extends beyond elementary programs like College Park and Chocachatti. In Florida, several middle schools are implementing the program and Chiles Academy in Port Orange became the first high school in the nation to use it for all grades.

The Chiles' Micro program is unique in that the students are soon-to-be or already mothers. "We have a group of students who are kind of disconnected with society," says Joy Brady, coordinator of Chiles' *MicroSociety* program, as reported in the Daytona Beach News. According to Chiles Executive Director Anne Ferguson, 26 percent





of the students are homeless and one in five has an identified disability that can interfere with learning. Although many of the Chiles students are learning some very tough lessons both in the classroom and in life, most agree the program is helping them. 19-year-old Kellie Burton says, "I think it's a good idea for when we get out in the real world." Now in its fourth year, the school serves 66 girls age 14 through 20 and their 44 babies and toddlers.

LIKE ALL SOCIETIES, a Micro-Society cannot exist without knitting together the private and public sectors. Indeed, the sooner you build bridges to the businesses, civic groups, agencies and religious organizations in your community, the easier it will be to secure the resources you need to create the program.

In most communities where micro societies have been formed, employers have been willing partners and have made generous donations of time, expertise, site improvements, equipment, materials and money to the cause. Community partners also are a vital component of any Micro program,

providing both expertise and financial support. Bankers come into the school and help the teachers and students to set up the micro program bank. Judges and lawyers often come into the school to train the teachers and students who work in the courts. Officers from local police departments frequently come into the school to train the crimestoppers.

Lan and Oliver Plunkett, who heard about Huskyville through Beth McCall at the Public Education Foundation, were among the first to begin donating their time, money and energy a couple of years ago. They even donated Huskyville's downtown gazebo, which the students then memorialized with a plaque in their honor.

"Education is the vehicle to a successful life," says Lan, who bubbles over with excitement about Huskyville and its citizens. "The community should be aware of it and the difference it makes in schools."

A Micro program also provides many opportunities for parents to become involved. In some schools, the parents

help by constructing the storefronts, courtrooms and mailboxes. In another school, a group of parents worked in the companies and agencies along with the teachers and students. The parents even received wages paid in micros and had their own checking accounts at the Micro bank

What Richmond noticed in 1967 is what the Plunketts, Brady, Ferguson and all the teachers in Micro schools across Florida are noticing today: that kids totally engaged and immersed in the experience of *MicroSociety* succeed in school and in life.

"The quality of our future relies almost solely upon the quality of education. To be successful in today's competitive world, students need to know more, be more highly skilled and more versatile than ever before," says King. "However, even with advances in technology, student success is being threatened by non-traditional "educators" outside of the schoolhouse in the form of television, music, movies, video games, violence and a myriad of bad choices. Opportunities must exist to provide students with real-world experiences that encourage learning and support varied interests and levels of learning readiness."

Over the next two years *MICROSOCIETY* plans to double the number of sites across the country. A Micro program offers parents, citizens and businesses two main avenues in which to get involved: volunteerism and philanthropy. "*MicroSociety* programs work," says King. "It's real-world learning that's making a world of difference and you can be a part of it." ●

To donate to MICROSOCIETY or to find out how you can bring MicroSociety to your region or school, contact Carolyn King, 13 S. 3rd St., Philadelphia, PA 19106-2801. Phone: 215.922.4006, info@microsociety.org or visit www.microsociety.org