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EDUCATION AND BUSINESS

Partners in Reshaping Tomorrow's Worker

Patricia Fry

Not since the child-labor disputes at the turn of this century has there been such concern about children and their relationship to work. Only now the pendulum has swung just about as far as it can go the other way.

According to George Richmond, founder of the MicroSociety School concept, a program designed to replicate a working society within the schoolhouse, "Present-day children have become a leisure class." He explains, "The technological revolution and the move from farms has changed the nature of work both in the workplace and at home. Children no longer have authentic opportunities to work. As a result, I think many of them have a distorted sense of reality about work now and when they become adults."

Rick Fallon, director of community affairs for the Grand Metropolitan Corporation in Westport, Connecticut, echoes Richmond's concerns. "With Grand Met owning companies like Pillsbury, Burger King, and Häagen-Dazs, we have a real awareness of the kind of worker who is coming into our businesses from school and how prepared they are for work," he says. "In many cases, they are not as prepared for work as they might be."

This concerns the RJR Nabisco Foundation, too. Joellen Shiffman, director of philanthropy for the Washington, D.C., organization, says, "It's not like it was in the sixties when 60 percent of all work was unskilled labor. Now, in order to hold down even an entry-level position, you have to be able to operate a computer. By the year 2000, something like 85 percent of all work will require computer skills."

Patricia Fry is a California-based writer.

"To have computer skills," Shiffman explains, "you have to be able to think, process information, read and translate manuals, and make judgments. We're still educating kids for an agricultural age, not a computer age."

And it's costing business plenty. According to Shiffman, "American business is spending between \$50 billion and \$60 billion a year to train entry-level employees because when they come to us they don't even have the basic skills to do entry-level work. We can't afford that!"

What is the alternative? Many large corporations as well as community businesses are forming partnerships with public schools in an attempt to add the finishing touches they feel are lacking in today's high-school graduates. These partnerships vary from a passive involvement—money for computers or the donation of used equipment, for example—to active relationships that include classroom volunteers from the business community, large grants given to start or to continue special educational-enhancement programs, and the introduction of new concepts into the educational system.

MICROSOCIETY

Richmond's MicroSociety School program, for example, is based on two premises: that students take schoolwork more seriously when they understand how it relates to their life outside school and that kids learn better by doing.

Currently 120 schools throughout the United States are implementing the MicroSociety theme of operating a community within a school, where the students live and work for a portion of each school day. These minicommunities gen-

erally include a bank, post office, newspaper, government offices, a courthouse, and a variety of private enterprises.

Carolyn Cahoon is principal at Henry E. Kentopp, a primary (K-4) MicroSociety School in East Orange, New Jersey. She says, "We take what we've learned in the academic portion of the school day and try to incorporate it into what we call the 'real world.'"

The children have jobs and even receive paychecks, with which they pay taxes, rent for their school desks, and any fines that may have been levied that week for infractions. With what's left, they can go shopping at the marketplace. If they spend beyond their financial means or wish to invest in a business venture, they can attempt to negotiate a loan from the local bank—with interest, of course.

Landing a job in the MicroSociety is much like getting one in the real world. According to Cahoon, "We have two job fairs a year to give the kids the opportunity to experience different kinds of employment." The children are coached on how to present themselves at a job interview, and they're even faced with the real-world possibility of having to decide between two jobs or not getting a job at all.

"If they don't land a job or are laid off," says Cahoon, "we have an employment service, where they can look at other job possibilities. Some of the students work in maintenance with our custodian or in the beautification department, where they help with the landscaping. My office is the Office of Internal Affairs or the Hall of Records, and some students come in here to work."

MicroSociety has been in place for three years at Varnum Brook Middle School in Pepperell, Massachusetts. Teacher John McSheehy has been involved from the beginning. He says, "We

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thought the concept was viable in the sense that it would make education more meaningful, relevant, and interesting and that students would see more clearly the connection between what happens in school and what happens outside the school. It's a hands-on, experiential thing where students actually apply what they typically learn more passively in the classroom setting."

McSheehy describes how MicroSociety relates to academics. "We have identified five strands or areas of concentration: government, economy, science, publishing, and technology. Each of these strands relates to a traditional subject. If you're going to work in the economy strand, you're probably going to utilize math skills as much as any. If you're working in publishing, you'll use skills that relate to English or language arts. Science speaks for itself.

"The government strand involves things like administrative and government offices—the postal service, the IRS, and the Departments of Labor and Commerce, which issues patents to businesses, and this relates to social studies."

McSheehy knew from the beginning that operating a program as complex and diverse as the MicroSociety School would require support from the community. He started by soliciting parent volunteers. "From a student body of 140, 92 parents offered to help that first year," he said.

And because many of those parents were part of the business community, a necessary link was created. A parent who was a professional photographer helped set up a darkroom for the science strand

and gave teachers and students some technical instruction. Another parent was a computer expert and worked with the students in the technology strand. A local bank manager helped students set up a bank, an attorney offered guidance in establishing a court system, a newspaper publisher helped in the publishing strand, and the local cable television station worked with kids in the technology strand.

Four of Judy Molligi's six children are products of a MicroSociety School. She had sons Joseph and Michael bused out of their neighborhood to attend Richmond's first MicroSociety School in Lowell, Massachusetts, during the 1980s because she wanted seventh grader Joseph to have the opportunity to work with computers in school. Says Molligi, "I know now that my son has attention deficit disorder. Back then he was just considered hyper, and it was difficult for him to stay in a seat for a full school day. I knew he was bright and interested in computers, and I thought that might keep his attention.

"The boys," according to Molligi, "took a liking to the environment and to the learning styles, so much so that within a couple of weeks my daughter Kathleen, who was in sixth grade, asked if she could go to that school, too." The youngest Molligi child is an eighth grader there now.

How did the MicroSociety concept serve the Molligi children? Says Molligi: "My son who had difficulty with math concepts was very successful running businesses and could understand the idea of keeping a ledger and the concept of

income, wages, and taxes. By putting a practical application to what he had difficulty learning in a classroom setting, he was able to grasp the concepts."

She continues, "Kids are required to get involved in so many different ways that it allows them the opportunity to find out what their gift is and to use it. It gives them more ways to be successful."

RJR NABISCO

The RJR Nabisco Foundation recently earmarked \$30 million for public-education reform. Through its Next Century Schools program, it funded forty-two schools to the tune of up to \$250,000 each per year for three years. But RJR Nabisco didn't develop a particular program. It wanted the schools to do that themselves.

According to Shiffman, "We wanted the applying schools to tell us, 'If money was no object, what would you do to improve the rate and level of student achievement?' We wanted them to tell us what needed to change. And we set the money amount high so that money wouldn't be an issue—so they could just go wild with their dreams."

RJR Nabisco's generosity gave birth to Recess Math, the brainchild of a leadership team at Davis Elementary School in Gresham, Oregon. According to principal Donnise Brown, "Our goal was to improve math achievement scores, and the problem seemed to be lack of time to spend on mathematics throughout the academic day."

But what Brown noticed was that many students were dropped off at school early by parents on their way to work and that they stayed after school hours. During recess, the children often played board

games because the frequent rain prohibited outside activities. Brown's team decided to capture some of that free time and provide the students with an opportunity to get more math instruction.

The RJR Nabisco Foundation grant allowed Brown to hire a math specialist. The school began offering additional math classes during recess as an elective—classes designed to enhance the regular math classes through computer programs, for example. According to Brown, "Ninety percent of the students ended up taking Recess Math. In fact, we always had more kids than we could accommodate."

Per the agreement, funding ended after three years, but because of the program's success (which was reflected in the classroom and in subsequent testing), RJR Nabisco gave the school district a \$100,000 replication grant that helped place Recess Math in five more district schools.

While some Next Century School projects involved the implementation of just one program, other schools, according to Shiffman, "wanted to take a look at a systemic change across the board. At John Marshall High School in Los Angeles, for example, they wanted to put students in small groups that would stay together throughout the course of their high-school experience.

"Park View Elementary in Mooresville, North Carolina," says Shiffman, "wanted to go to year-round schooling."

Dan Owens, principal of Union House Elementary School in Sacramento, used the RJR Nabisco funding to accomplish a lot of things. He says, "The main focus of the Next Century Schools program was that they wanted us to be mold breakers—to try approaches that were different, to take risks and to see whether