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# LESSONS FOR LIFE

**AMY ALBRIGHT RECENTLY JOINED THE RANKS OF** America's fastest-growing human resource— young serial entrepreneurs. After completing courses in marketing and advertising, she started a fast-food business, opened an arts-and-crafts shop, and worked in partnership with some of her childhood friends. She refines her managerial skills at her community bank, where she handles payroll for other area businesses. But she's still unsure of her future. After all, she's just 11 years old.

Even at her age, Amy understands more about how businesses work than some professionals do: Misplaced advertising means that customers won't come. Being too strict about rules and procedures means that the best people won't work for you.

How did this fifth-grader get so savvy? Everything she knows about business she learned in public school—in a “micro-society” called Garehime Heights, in Las Vegas. Based at Edith Garehime Elementary School, the micro-society has its own marketplace and currency, postal service, and court system, all run by the kids.

This isn't a land of snooty hall monitors and student-council presidents. At Garehime, everyone is a leader, everyone has a paying job, and everyone is held accountable. “Our mission is to help people become responsible citizens of a democracy,” explains Francie Summers, the school's principal.

Discarding the command-and-control leadership model that so many schools follow, Garehime uses a consensus-based model, in which teachers and students create a common set of expectations. “It's cool to behave the right way here,” Summers says. “You have choices. That's what the court is about. That's what the jobs are about. That's how we foster independence.”

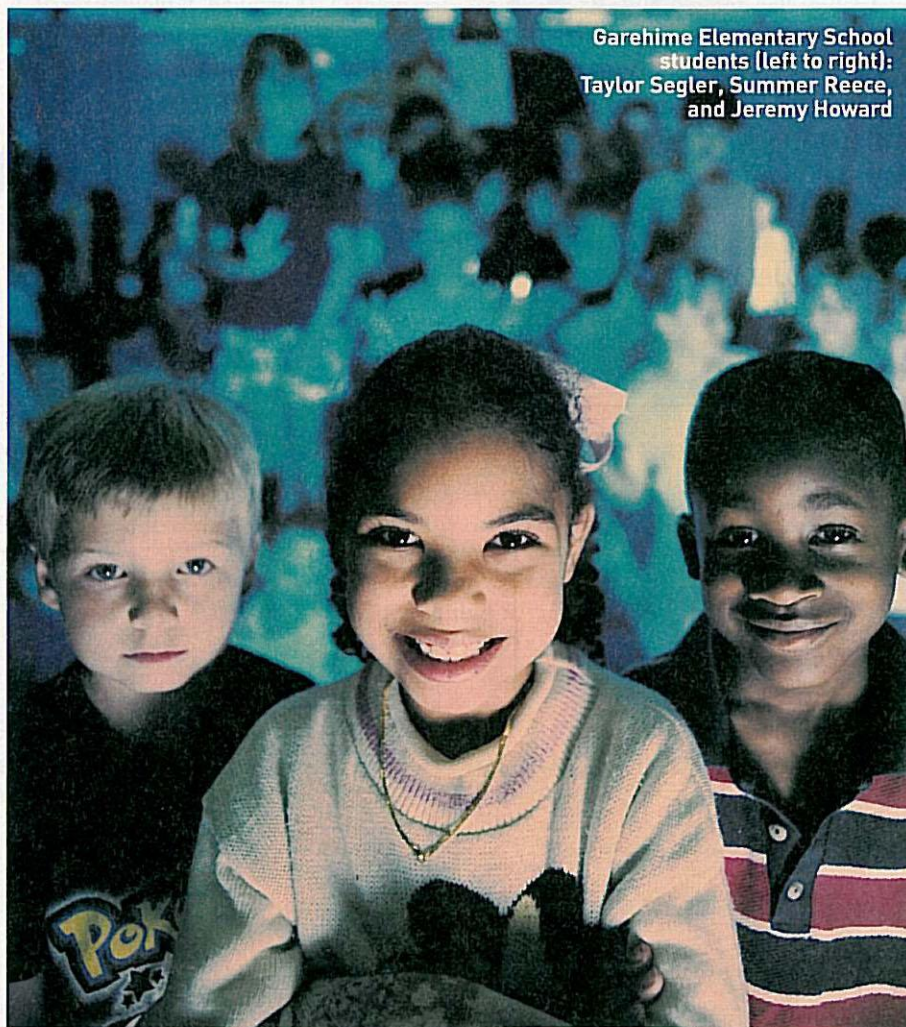
Occasionally, some students even act as “teacher for a day” or “principal for a day.”

AT GAREHIME ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, IN LAS VEGAS, STUDENTS HAVE THEIR OWN CURRENCY, POSTAL SERVICE, AND COURT SYSTEM. THIS “MICROSOCIETY” TEACHES MORE THAN READING AND WRITING: IT TEACHES LIFE AND LEADERSHIP. **BY REKHA BALU**

Kids who earn currency rewards for their leadership and life skills—a convention of the micro-society—are tapped for these posts, which come with rigorous tasks: “Teachers” fill out their own lesson plans. “Principals” leave complimentary notes for exceptional teachers and students. “We're getting stu-

dents to think about attending college, going into the education field, and succeeding in the workplace,” Summers says.

The school's businesses and curricula follow an annual theme. This year, Garehime is set up like a ship. Each pod of classrooms represents a different port of call—to reflect



Garehime Elementary School students (left to right): Taylor Segler, Summer Reece, and Jeremy Howard



**"LIFE SKILLS ARE SO MUCH BETTER THAN RULES, BECAUSE THEY HELP YOU FIGURE OUT WHAT'S RIGHT AND WHAT'S WRONG."**



how various jobs take you to new places. Classrooms are grouped into "cabins" on "decks" that are named for various leadership traits. (There is a "Perseverance Promenade," for example.) Students can earn Garehime Gold—currency equal to 10 cents—by demonstrating leadership attributes, such as respect, integrity, and creativity.

Mrs. Mercer's fifth-grade class, along with a third-grade class, runs the school's bank, the backbone of all of Garehime's businesses. "The students' interest and skill in math increase from the beginning of the school year to the end," Mercer says. "And they have pride in themselves, because they have important jobs." Some other student-run operations include the Environmental Protection Agency, a recycling service; students do everything from bottle collection

to accounts receivable. But abusing one's responsibilities comes with a cost: Third-grader Bud Ryan Reschke was fired from his wagon-pulling job because he ran through the hallways. Sitting out of that job for four weeks wounded his pride more than any detention or demerit would have done. "It was awful," says the nine-year-old.

The school opened two years ago, as part of an effort to address the needs of Las Vegas's exploding population and overcrowded school system. Garehime sits at the foot of the Sierra Nevadas and faces a warren of peach-colored planned communities. This isn't a typical suburban outpost, however. Some of the newer homes house several families, and more than one-fourth of the 1,220 schoolchildren at Garehime are members of racial-minority groups.

But by any standard measures, Garehime has become a success story. In its first year, the school had no habitual disciplinary problems or truancy—unlike many other elementary schools in the fast-growing Clark County School District. And students here scored well above national and district average-percentile ranks in reading, math, language, and science. In its first year, Garehime spent \$2,944 per pupil; the district average is \$3,269.

Garehime's micro-society is a model for building leaders when you have few resources but lots of passion. Fifth-grader Amanda Lewis will be sorry to leave Garehime when she graduates next year. "Here, the principal knows your name, the teachers are nice, and the work is fun," says the 11-year-old, freckle-faced brunette. "And life skills are so much better than rules, because they help you figure out what's right and what's wrong."

They also give students a healthy respect for what it takes to earn a living—because the kids' own jobs are on the line at school. "They know that you don't get an allowance for nothing and that a parent's money doesn't magically come out of an ATM," says Michelle Lewis, 33, Amanda's mother.

Parents have tangible proof that the program is working. Sherrie Jackson's daughter, Alicia, an eight-year-old third-grader, now reads at a fifth-grade level. As a first-grader at another school, she read at the bottom level of her class.

Summers doesn't want Garehime to be an exceptional experience among schools. She would like to see it become the norm. "This model can be replicated," she says, "if teachers and administrators are willing to put in extra work and to take advantage of the opportunity to be creative."

CONTACT FRANCIE SUMMERS BY EMAIL (FRANCIE@SUMMERSLASVEGAS.COM), OR LEARN MORE ABOUT GAREHIME ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ON THE WEB (WWW.SUMMERSLASVEGAS.COM/GAREHIME).