TECHNOLOGY ISSUE

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BY LYNN WALDSMITH

The "bank" at Davison Elementary in Detroit is owned, operated, and patronized by students during MicroSociety period.

There's a pea-sized hole in the front of his sky-blue polo shirt, but Darnell Lee seems more intrigued by it than embarrassed. The doe-eyed 10-year-old pushes his little finger through the hole and fidgets as he waits for permission to begin his shift. Darnell, who wants to be a police officer when he grows up, is hoping to don the revered uniform that he first wore a week ago: a fire-engine-red T-shirt emblazoned with "Crime Stoppers" in large black letters. But he may not get the chance. During his first day on the job, right after the teacher in charge of "law enforcement" at Detroit's William Davison Elementary School reminded her team to set a good example, Darnell's unbridled enthusiasm blinded his judgment. He got busted for doing handstands in the hallway.

"Darnell, here's your shirt," says Lord Brackx. "But remember, you are on probation."

Brackx is Davison's coordinator of MicroSociety, a program that enables kids to set up mini-communities in their schools, and thus learn about entrepreneurship and democracy. Darnell nods. Minutes later, just after 3 o'clock, he takes his post near a stairwell that will soon swarm with students heading toward their MicroSociety classrooms. He leans against a pair of stainless steel drinking fountains and taps his left foot, anxious for the chance to prove that he is, in fact, worthy of the Crime Stoppers shirt that dangles to his knees.

Darnell isn't the only Davison kid committed to his work. Down the hall, James Williams, an 11-year-old in a Spiderman shirt, diligently puts the finishing touches on a place mat he's decorating. He holds the paper up to the light, inspects it for any white space, puts the mat down again, and rubs over it with a purple crayon.

Last year, James worked at the Bank of Davison, but he prefers the Rainbow
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Fourth grader Recce Benson takes an order at the Rainbow Café.

just so many opportunities to succeed. Everybody can feel the taste of success."

Participating educators note that the program's hands-on activities, from baking cookies to putting together museum exhibits, not only instill a sense of accomplishment but also make lessons stick.

When youngsters tally profits or measure ingredients, for example, math is no abstract matter. And writing your own constitution is arguably more memorable than simply studying the Founding Fathers. At Davison, the process took several weeks;

after the school set up the MicroSociety program, about 60 4th and 5th graders pored over the U.S. Constitution and other documents and then debated what to include in their version.

Such activities have paid off at Davison, where all students and teachers participate in the program. Since 1996, standardized math test scores have jumped 43 percent and reading scores 53 percent—increases largely attributable to MicroSociety, according to school officials. And, they note, attendance is up and the number of discipline problems is down.

Inside principal Phyllis Ross' office, black-and-white images from security cameras flicker on eight TV monitors. Davison is surrounded by abandoned homes and drug houses, and some kids come from transient or troubled families. In school, though, MicroSociety has fostered a collegial, cooperative environment. "The students seem to be a lot nicer to each other," Ross says. "They seem to be respecting each other more, and each other's property. And we haven't had as many fights."

Crime Stoppers like Darnell have helped keep the peace. Kids who are nabbed for misbehaving—name-calling, for example, or littering—face fines. Unless, that is, they manage to beat the charges in Davison's courtroom. Sometimes major cases are tried there. A few years ago, a bank teller was accused of slipping extra money to his friends. So one day, during Micro period, 12 of the student's peers served as jury and meted out justice. In the end, with the aid of a supervising teacher, they found the kid guilty and recommended community service.

Today, though, the judges' docket is pretty thin. So huddled in a classroom marked "Court of Davison" and asked about their jobs, they share judicial philosophies. Fourth grader Mohammed Rahman jams his hands into his cargo pants and declares: "I want to make people be good." Ratana Miah, a 6th grader with shoulder-length black hair, offers a less conservative view. "I want to help people solve their problems," she says earnestly, twirling the bottom of her flowered shirt. "I want to help people." M icroSociety is, to a large extent, about money. Of the more than 35 ventures that Davison teachers created this year based on a survey of students' interests, most are commercial enterprises. There's even a company that produces ads, posters, and Web sites to plug Micro products and services. And once kids earn micros, there are many ways to spend them: on school supplies once a week, for instance, or at the monthly marketplace where student shopkeepers set out their wares: everything from bottle-top refrig or magnets to egg-carton mancas. The school's annual auction offers big-ticket items, such as bicycles, donated by local businesses.

Under scoring capitalism does have its drawbacks, according to John Douglas Hoge, an associate professor of social science education at the University of Georgia. Several years ago, when Hoge was a 5th grade MicroSociety teacher, a young mayoral candidate at his school was caught trading micros for votes. An unemployment problem also developed because top managers decided that several of their employees weren't working hard enough. Do these problems reflect real life? Absolutely. But they aren't necessarily teachable moments. "I mean, are you going to look a kid in the face and say, 'Nobody wants to hire you?"
you, and here’s why?” Hoge points out. “The elementary teacher is taught to shelter children and to be inclusive.”

Of greater concern to some critics is that schools may implement the MicroSociety program without incorporating academic standards. “Students can spend a lot of time having a great time and learning lots of skills that may not be part of what they need to know so they’re ready for the next school year,” cautions Billie Orr, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Education Leaders Council, a nonprofit group that promotes accountability.

At Davison, however, the program covers state standards, Bracks notes. Links to classroom learning, she adds, are often made during MicroSociety periods. What’s more, the program offers real-world knowledge: During a monthlong “academy,” for example, students learn about the work lives of their grown-up counterparts by practicing various job skills, including, in Darnell’s case, stopping lawbreakers. When the academy is over, the kids attend a job fair dressed in their Sunday best and with application, résumé, and letter of reference in hand.

Supervising students in a MicroSociety operation isn’t easy. Teachers and administrators who set up the program and then help kids run their ventures need extensive training, which can be pricey: The first three years of support from the national office can cost as much as $115,000. Afterward, schools like Davison spend roughly $12,000 annually on supplies and products, such as lesson plans, from MicroSociety Inc.

But Davison officials believe the costs are worth bearing. MicroSociety even has improved the appearance of the 90-year-old building: A huge mural brightens a once-dingy hallway with facades of a small-town Main Street. And parents like Yolanda Cuff are thrilled that the program teaches kids about responsibility. “They look forward to coming to school and making money on their job,” she notes.

“They say, ‘Mom, I got a job, just like you.’ It teaches them some values.”

As today’s MicroSociety period winds down, such values are in evidence. Darnell Lee carefully scans the crowd for inappropriate behavior. He shuts a few locker doors and tells a speedy 1st grader, “Walk, man, walk.” Then he spots trouble. A boy flies down the stairs with abandon, and Darnell stops him. “How many times do I have to tell you?” he chastises. “Walk.” Then, mustering the authority afforded him by his supervisor and the school’s constitution, he makes the violator go back up and walk down again.

If Darnell were instead sitting at a desk in a classroom focused strictly on academic standards, he’d lose out, King argues. “That’s a very prescriptive approach to learning,” she complains. “Are children going to love to learn? That’s really the key—learning to love to learn. That’s going to stay with you over your lifetime. That’s what MicroSociety does.”

Lynn Waldsmith is a freelance writer in Plymouth, Michigan.

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