

TEACHER MAGAZINE

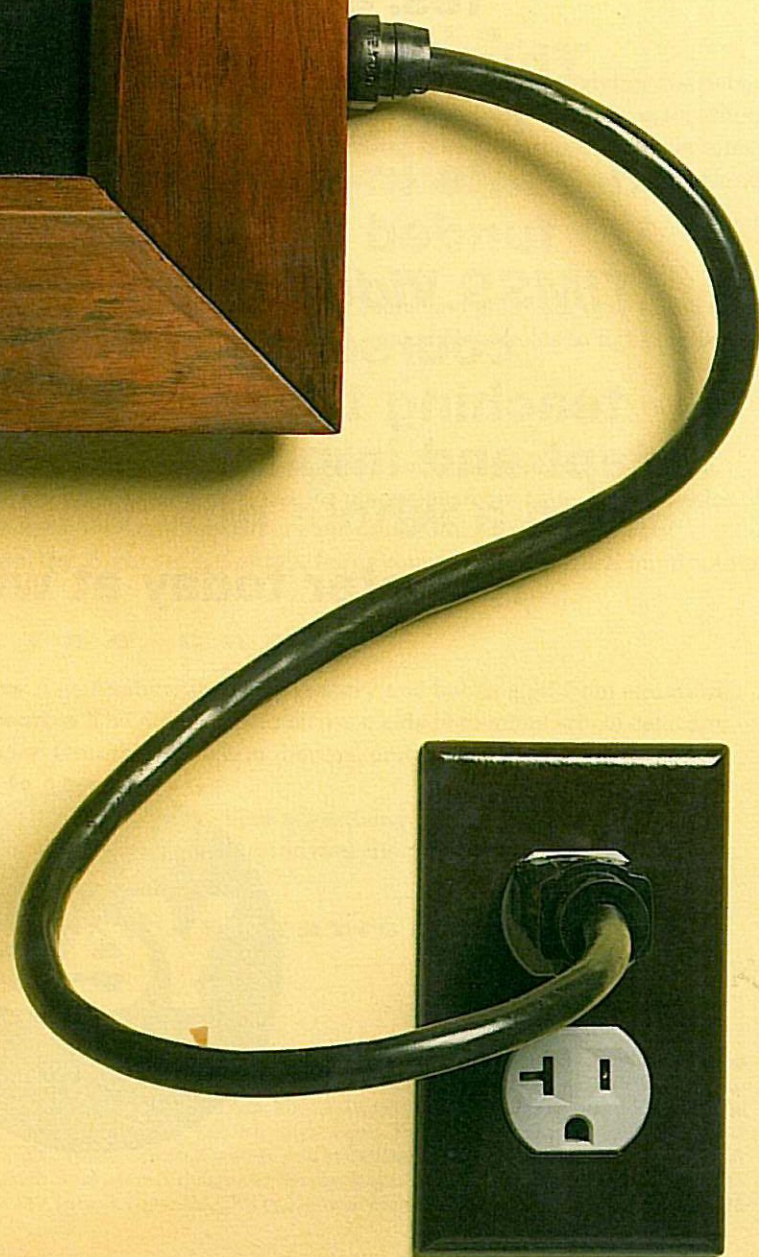
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TECHNOLOGY ISSUE

**With computers, a guidance counselor
lightens teenagers' loads**

**Need some tech support? Try enlisting
the aid of your students**

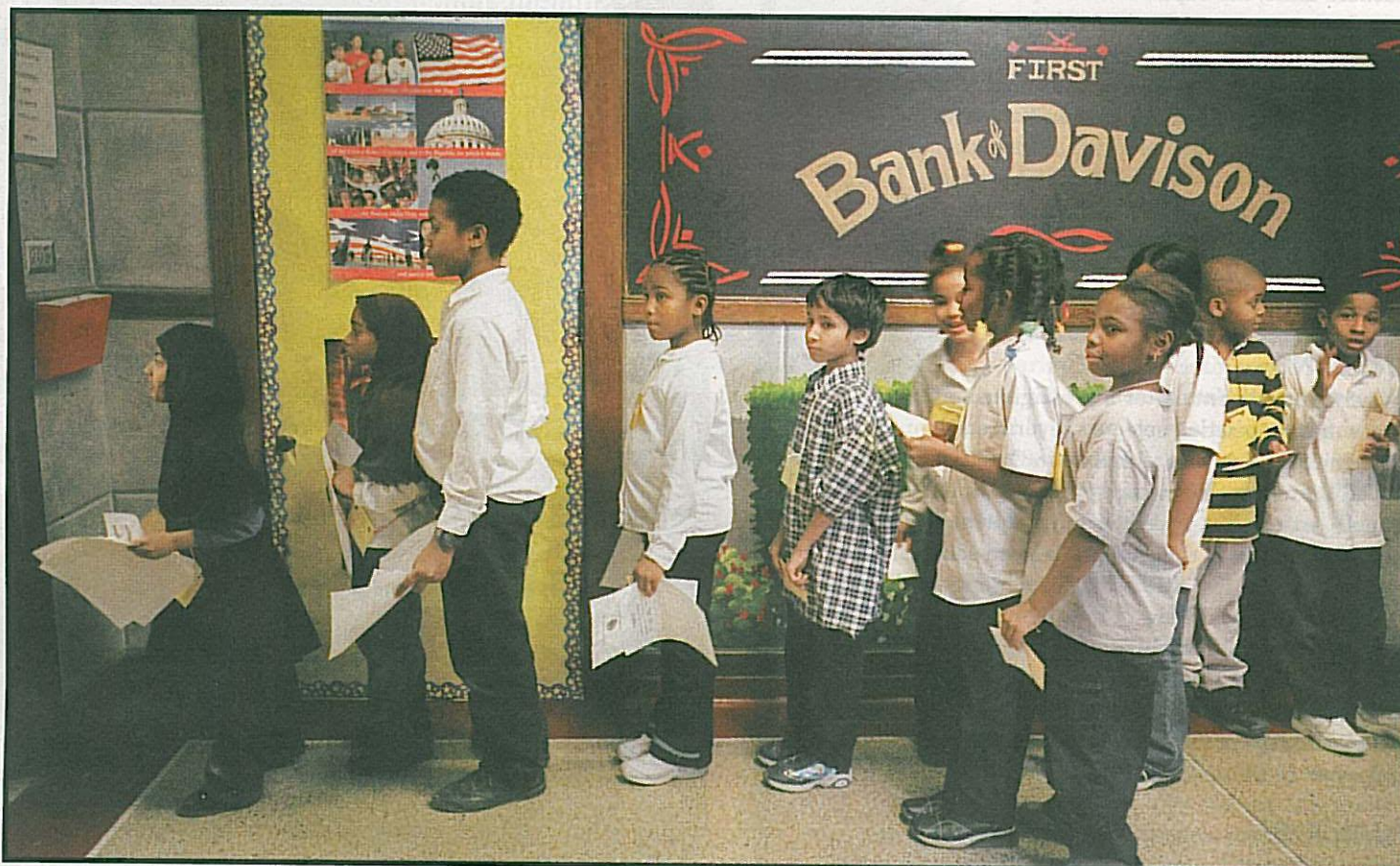
**For better or worse, research papers
are giving way to video projects**



The Real Deal

Why wait 'til kids grow up to show them how society works? They can learn money management now.

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 Lorol 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 hunches over it with a purple crayon.

Last year, James worked at the Bank of Davison, but he prefers the Rainbow

Café because the pay's better. The eatery is a profitable business, earning money—or "micros," as they're called—that later can be swapped for kid-made cards at the Carousel Card Shop, recycled-Styrofoam necklaces at MicroSociety's Earth Savers, and a number of other products and services created in dozens of classrooms throughout the school. Of course, the more money a kid takes in, the more he or she has to pony up in taxes to the IRS.

The MicroSociety program, which Davison adopted in 1995, is used in more than 200 elementary and middle schools nationwide. Administrators set aside anywhere from one period a week to one a day, allowing students to pursue various Micro activities, including writing laws, creating products, running cultural organizations, and handling the problems of a functioning community. Fans of the program argue in favor of its relevancy: Kids one day will have to work in the real world, so it makes sense to prepare them for it. Plus, hands-on activities help make learning fun. But critics worry that some participating schools are neglecting academic standards.

Despite potential drawbacks, many low-performing schools use MicroSociety as part of a reform effort. Davison, for example, is one of Detroit's largest elementary schools, with 972 students, 88 percent of whom live at or below poverty level. Since implementing the program twice a week during the last period of the day, the school has seen major progress in kids' attitudes and jumps in standardized test scores.

"Kids who are good students will be good students anywhere," says Brackx. "It's those middle-of-the-road kinds of kids that this program is especially good at helping. If we can find the right hook for them—the right job or venture—then we can get them excited about MicroSociety and school because they see the connection, the significance of why they need to learn things."

In 1967, George Richmond, then a 22-year-old conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, took a teaching assignment at an elementary school in Brooklyn. His eye-opening introduction to education entailed being tossed into a class of 33 underachieving, unruly 5th graders. His principal's words of wisdom: "Contain them."

Richmond instead searched for a way to motivate the kids. He hit upon the idea of rewarding finished homework and other academic accomplishments with "money" that could buy prizes like donated board games. In almost no time, the kids were showing a genuine interest in learning. Gradually, the concept evolved into a primitive form of MicroSociety.

In 1973, Richmond, who had left New York to get a master's degree in public administration and a doctorate in education from Harvard, outlined his marketplace model in *The Micro-Society School*. Impressed by what they read, parents and teachers at Clement G. McDonough Elementary in Lowell, Massachusetts, launched the first schoolwide MicroSociety project in 1981. The idea soon spread to a half-dozen schools along the East Coast. Then in 1992, Richmond gave up his career as an administrator and education consultant to found the nonprofit MicroSociety Inc., which provides training and materials to educators interested in the program.

Today, the program is used in 40 states, sometimes just in individual classes but mostly as a schoolwide effort—and often as a means to reform a failing institution. "It's so good for so many children," says Carolyn King, executive director of the Philadelphia-based group and George Richmond's wife. "There are

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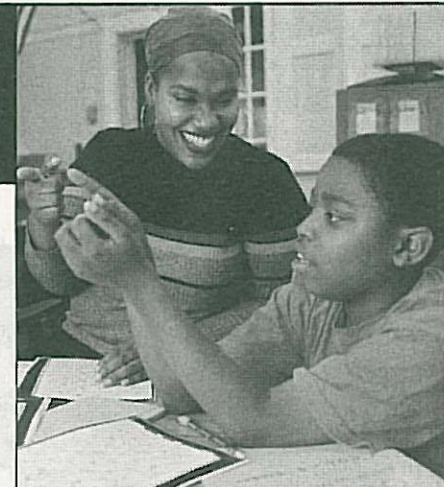
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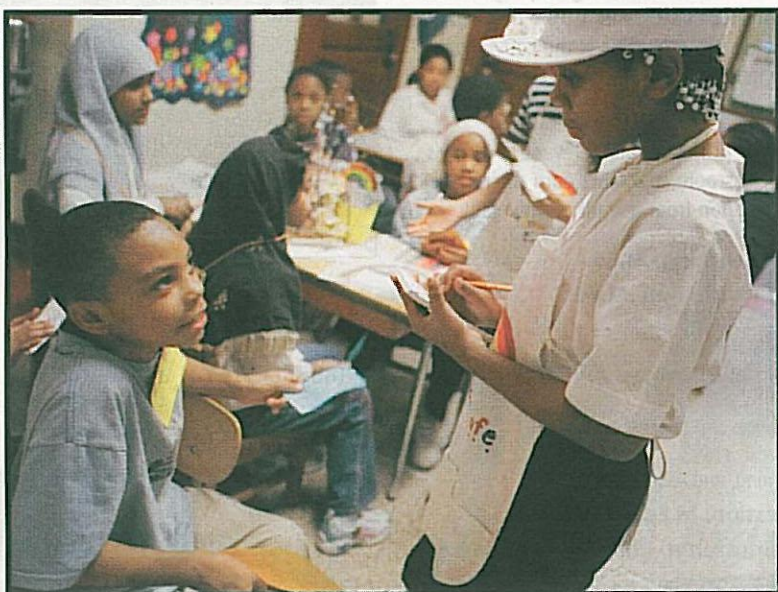


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MICHELLE ANDONIAN



Fourth grader Recca 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 1995, 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." Ratna Miah, a 5th grader with shoulder-length black hair, offers a less conservative view. "I want to help people solve their problems," she says earnestly, twisting the bottom of her flowered shirt. Ratna one day would like to be a real member of the bench. "Judges make a lot of money," she notes, though she's not focused on personal gain. "When I get some money," she points out, "I want to help poor people."

MicroSociety 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 refrigerator magnets to egg-carton maracas. The school's annual auction offers big-ticket items, such as bicycles, donated by local businesses.

Underscoring 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 student 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

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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, Brackx 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 often 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 façades 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.

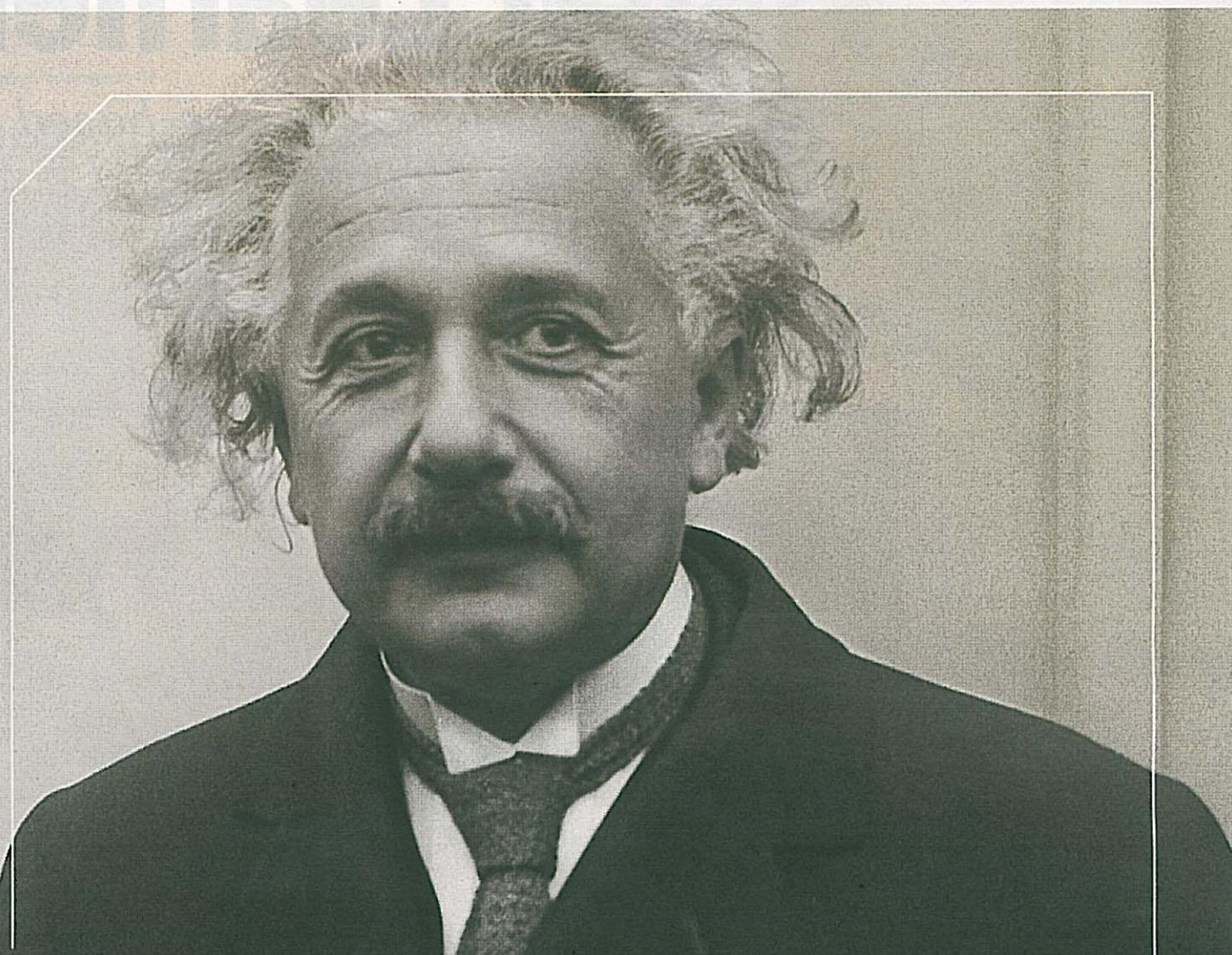
"They say, 'Mom, I got a job, just like you.' It teaches them some values."

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 free-lance writer in Plymouth, Michigan.



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