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BUILDING CITIZENSHIP SKILLS THROUGH SCHOOL, UNIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

April 22, 2015 | Thomas J. Scott



One of the fundamental purposes of public education is to nurture the creation of the skills, attitudes and behaviors associated with citizen engagement. Such engagement is critical to the realization of the Jeffersonian ideal of an enlightened citizenry capable of promoting the freedom and governmental oversight necessary to democracy. The development of service learning opportunities is essential to this vision. Schools and local communities should not exist in isolation. They need to be interconnected partners striving to promote healthy, secure environments that will promote the general welfare of their citizenry. Schools and local communities exist in a symbiotic relationship. If given the opportunity, students can act as an important catalyst to address the pressing challenges communities face in our global age.

The Resilient Communities Project (RCP) is an example of an innovative and dynamic partnership between local communities and The University of Minnesota. Local government officials, community stakeholders, University faculty and students collaborate on projects designed to promote sustainable, community-based programs that promote a more livable and sustainable future. This year the city of Rosemount, a suburb twenty-five miles south of the Twin Cities, received a RCP grant that has led to the creation of over 30 different projects with assistance from the University. As part of this linkage, several students in the course Political Science 1001: The Challenge to Democracy, a concurrent enrollment course offered at Rosemount High School in conjunction with The University of Minnesota's Political Science Department, volunteered their time to work with students from the University's Youth Studies Department to promote healthy and safe behavioral options for youth in the community.

An integral aspect of establishing a more livable and sustainable community is how youth are integrated into the community's vision for the future. The City of Rosemount has trend data suggesting school safety, substance abuse, and driving behavior are affecting the health and safety of youth in the community. Rosemount students participated in three projects designed to address these challenges: developing a safe driving program for students at the high school; developing supplemental curricula to update an existing drug awareness program; and implementing a school-wide recycling program. These programs reflect the city's vision that "Engaging Rosemount youth and ensuring they have access to healthy and robust lifestyles, will improve the social interactions in the community" (City of Rosemount, 2014).

To promote safe driving in the community Rosemount students administered an online survey to 137 seniors designed to assess their attitudes toward the driver education course offered at the school. Of the survey respondents, 84% had valid driver licenses. The students analyzed the survey responses and discovered specific themes related to perceptions of the driver's education curriculum in the school. Two major recommendations emerged from the senior students' responses: the desire for additional real-time driving experiences in the course to help students adapt to all kinds of road conditions and different situations encountered while driving; and more instruction that focused on the dangers of texting and multitasking while behind the wheel. This data was then shared with The University of Minnesota Youth Studies students who incorporated it into an extensive literature review of policy recommendations for safe driving to ensure young people in Rosemount learn to become safer and more responsible drivers.

Concerning drug and alcohol awareness, Rosemount students are helping to evaluate the school's drug and alcohol awareness curriculum that is taught to all 9th grade students in their Health and Wellness classes, and a program taught to 6th grade students in the Developmental Psychology course. A detailed literature review conducted by a member of the Youth Studies Program at the University found that programs like D.A.R.E. have proven to be ineffective in reducing alcohol and drug use in teenagers. Youth Studies Program students created policy recommendations to implement a new supplemental curriculum focused on a "reality-based" approach that would use empirical data to explain the nature of student drug use, develop curricular resources for students confronting substance abuse issues, and implement "restorative" rather than punitive policies for students who violate school policy regarding illicit drug use. Rosemount students will help implement this supplemental curriculum through providing peer training to the Developmental Psychology students who teach in the drug education

program at the elementary schools in our district.

Rosemount High School's Green Team; a school-based environmental club led by Ms. Veda Kanitz, a Science teacher at Rosemount High School also participated in the Resilient Communities Project. The Green Team recently received a grant from the county to reduce classroom waste in the school's lunchroom using a color-coordinated system of waste bins to collect and sort recyclable containers, organic food waste, and trash. The Green team was able to recruit and train student volunteers to assist in the school-wide implementation of the recycling program. Teachers, custodians, and school administrators also volunteered time to the project. The Green Team received support from members of the Rosemount community who volunteered to monitor the implementation of the project in the school lunchroom. Several local businesses provided gift certificates to motivate students to sort their waste products and students from the College in the Schools American Democracy class conducted interviews related to the goals and implementation stages of the project. This interview data was then used in a class project on designing policy related to sustainability in public schools.

The American philosopher John Dewey observed that schools must be a mirror image of the communities they serve. He stressed the students in those schools must be prepared to serve their communities as engaged, participatory citizens. The relationship between school and community is integral to a vibrant democracy. To enhance this relationship, schools must establish a commitment to foster the skills, aptitudes, and requisite behaviors that are essential to democratic life. Engaged citizenship does not emerge from a vacuum. It does not gradually occur through some form of osmosis. It does, however, require vision on the part of teachers and administrators who are willing to engage students in continuous democratic practice. It also requires local political leaders to take risks, allowing young people to utilize their tremendous skills, talents, and energies to enhance quality of life measures in their communities. The Resilient Communities Project has provided a unique, collaborative endeavor between city-government, an internationally recognized research university, and a local public school to work in unison toward the goal of making communities more sustainable places to live, work and learn.

Work Cited. Communications & Neighborhood Engagement: Healthy and Safe Youth Behavior, (2014-2015), City of Rosemount; Resilient Communities Application.

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