

Stop Tobacco in Restaurants: Fifth Grade Students STIR City Hall

It all started with a night of bowling in Austin, Texas, when fifth grade student Amit had an evening of fun with his grandparents. When Amit returned to his home in Lubbock, Texas, and tried to replicate his new found recreation, his night of bowling fun ended after ten minutes in an asthma attack. His second attempt at Lubbock bowling also brought a return of the asthma terror. He said, "My mother didn't let me go back again. This became sort of serious because I wanted to have some fun." After Amit identified the problem as the second hand smoke in the bowling alley, he started seeking a solution to this problem. To redress this situation fourth and fifth grade students Abby, Amit, Ben, David, Lori, Rachel, and Wade started a campaign called STIR: Stop Tobacco in Restaurants. The goal was to end smoking in public places including restaurants, bowling alleys, sports bars, and pool halls. For two years they motivated their peers, coordinated an information campaign to urge kids and adults to find out about the dangers of second hand smoke, and they eventually succeeded in passing a city ordinance banning smoking in public places.

Solution Seeking

Amit started by making a presentation during convocation at his school. He wrote a rough draft and showed it to the other kids and adults, who in turn made suggestions for revising the document. Amit remembers cutting out a cartoon of a man saying, "Bye" from the end of the program because his peers did not think it was appropriate. Most of the changes, however, were additions to the program as the students did more research and learned more about the effects of second hand smoke. By using the Internet and libraries they conducted basic research using such questions as, "Why are kids more susceptible to

second hand smoke?” Amit and Ben also contacted representatives from the medical community to help them with their research. They used their research to create a PowerPoint presentation about the effects of second hand smoke and what could be done about it. Next they designed the program to be a series of questions and answers; they took turns asking and answering the questions. From this experience the students learned how to do Internet research, how to look for the most important information in a research article, how to make a presentation, and how to speak in front of their peers and community leaders.

The students decided they needed to get information into the hands of other students and then to ask them to write letters to the city council and mayor requesting a ban on second hand smoke. In order to contact students in other schools, they spoke with school principals to arrange times when they could go and speak to the students. As the campaign progressed, schools started calling these students for information. Eventually they took their program into forty elementary schools; Amit and Ben went to thirty-five of them.

In the informational campaign Amit and Ben worked to educate people concerning the dangers of second hand smoke. They thought that people would want to vote responsibly if knew more about the issue. They decided that a web site would be a good way to communicate and share information (<http://www.STIRCampaign.org>). STIR members put a biography of each of the members on the site as well as a sample letter and an outline with instructions on how to write a persuasive letter and how to contact the city council. Next, through TV, radio, and newspaper interviews Amit and Ben got people to call and invite STIR representatives to speak. Amit and Ben spoke to each of the

following organizations: American Heart Association, Covenant Medical Board, Lubbock Parent Teacher Association, Staked Plains Council for the Social Studies, student councils at two junior high schools, Texas Tech University Student Senate, Texas PTA, and Tobacco Reduction Using Settlement Trust (TRUST).

Although the students began the information campaign on their own, they soon developed a coalition of eager allies. In 1995 a group of doctors had tried but failed to get Lubbock to pass an ordinance banning smoking in public places. The Smoke-Less Lubbock Coalition, American Lung Association, and the American Cancer Society had similar agendas for banning secondhand smoke. These groups raised money to rent billboard space in the city pointing out the dangers of second hand smoke to the general voting public and to run second hand smoke educational trailers in movie theaters before the films. All the groups shared information with one another.

The students approached individuals and corporations for money; support came from many diverse places including the American Cancer Society, American State Bank, TRUST: Tobacco Reduction Using the Settlement in Texas (TRUST, a coalition of many groups including the American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association), and Wells Fargo. The students checked to see who had contributed money previously and then targeted those groups again during this campaign. They solicited contributions from big organizations that agreed with them, but they also asked individual families for support. STIR sponsored a community youth rally to ban smoking, and the students solicited door prizes from local merchants such as Toys “R” Us, food donations from smoke free fast food restaurants, and a parent of one of the STIR members who collected toys as a hobby. The parents of the students provided transportation, financial, and moral

support; a parent of one of Amit and Ben's schoolmates provided ideas on media relations; the head of the local nurses' association helped them get information to all of the nurses in the city; and two nurses from the local cancer center gave them twenty minutes on their multiple smoking programs to explain the STIR program. In addition to all this support, individuals from the Texas Tech Health Science Center provided mentorship for the leaders in the STIR campaign, yet none of these adults or groups of adults did the grassroots work for the students.

Finding Common Ground

Ben said, "We didn't know what to expect, but as we got more used to it we realized the effects would probably be pretty positive." Working from a set of notes, Amit and Ben directly lobbied the mayor and all but one of the members of the city council, by setting up appointments to meet them at their offices, presented information, and listened to what each council member had to say. They presented their information to these elected officials and asked for their support in passing a smoking ban. Students learned persuasive speaking skills, developed a plan for lobbying the members of the council, and were persistent in answering questions and clarifying issues. As individuals found common ground, their resistance to the ordinance decreased. When asked why people changed their minds, Ben said, "Because we had good research, good information, and the facts were right." They did visit some council members twice and one member three times. In the third meeting with one council member, they brought a group of young students up to age 14 from the council member's precinct represented different races to tell the member that they wanted everything smoke free. When the council voted the member remarked, "We should do this for the kids and not for big business."

Amit said, “I thought we would go to city council, and they would just say, ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ and then we would just leave.” The city council met twice on this issue. In the first meeting, with many other students present, Amit addressed the city council, mayor, city attorney, and interested parties. The first meeting was a call to consider an ordinance, and the students presented their letters with data on second hand smoke. Then they selected the *ad hoc* committee. In a work session of the *ad hoc* committee they examined the question of a right of privacy issue. In the second work session of the *ad hoc* committee, they unanimously voted that second hand smoke was a danger and a health hazard. The city council formed an *ad hoc* committee that met many times to bring representatives of extreme views together and to form the legislation. In another meeting the council members heard the report from the *ad hoc* committee, established that public spaces should do something about this public health risk, and passed the ordinance.

Some adults didn’t really believe that we, as children, had decided to do this and were actually doing it. Some people were saying that we were the poster child[ren] of the American Cancer Society, like they put us up to this. But I think the majority of the community, that is familiar with this project, is convinced that we . . . started it. Because we are very interested in this issue, and . . . we believe it needs to be done. (Amit)

Reaching Compromises

Ben said, “It is not . . . easy to change something that is set.” Although the students wanted a comprehensive and immediate ban on smoking in all public places, they had to compromise with members of the restaurant owners association and the city council to reach a solution. The city council passed an ordinance that allowed three years for

restaurants to come into compliance with a no smoking ban. All fast food would go smoke free immediately. Bars, all bingo parlors built before January 1, 2002, and sports bars would be exempt. Areas where second hand smoking continued were required to post warning signs. After three years they must provide separate rooms with separate ventilation systems. While the students did not get everything they wanted, they learned that they could get much of what they wanted by compromising.

Well, to tell you the truth before this project I didn't really have a view of politics in the city government, so I learned a lot about it and . . . I think the biggest thing I learned about . . . government and . . . everyone in general [is] that most of the time everyone is good. You know there might be a few bad people, but I learned that most of the time people are just doing what they think is right. (Amit)

The students learned that all the people viewed the situation with self interest; only when they could see their common interest could they succeed. The students learned that part of government is reaching for the compromise that will work.

Before passing the ordinance, the local Libertarian Party launched a series of counter attacks to stop or reverse the ordinance; the counter attacks continued as the Vote for Freedom Coalition sponsored a referendum on the measure. Their stated position is that the role of government is to enact the least amount of legislation possible and still maintain a society. The STIR campaign undertook two projects to get out the vote in the referendum. The first was a second annual youth rally, and the second was a free car wash to spread the word to vote. Both of these events allowed students to spread the word about the importance of voting; neither of them was a fund raising event; they were strictly informational and educational events.

Celebration

The STIR campaign inspired student and adult adherents even outside of the community. Others celebrated the ideas of the STIR program. When citizens in the neighboring community of New Braunfels heard about the STIR campaign in Lubbock, they seized the idea and carried out a second hand smoke ban in their community. A city council member from New Braunfels came to the last Lubbock city council *ad hoc* work session to urge Lubbock to do what New Braunfels had just done.

The members of the community noticed the actions of these students across the first year of passing the legislation and defended it from referendum in the second year. “Lots of people we worked with probably have more respect for kids, and they probably know that if someone wants to do it, it can happen,” observed Ben. The entire group of seven students in the STIR campaign won the Community Service division of the International Future Problem Solvers Competition (<http://www.fpsp.org/index.htm>) as a sponsored school team. They presented a static display, a video, and a scrapbook to document their work. They entered this competitive event specifically to celebrate the work of all seven student leaders and their successes. Ben said, “Actually, to tell you the truth what kept me going was probably Amit. You could tell he was into it and kind of got me into it, too.” Amit’s contributions for the origination and leadership of the project were honored locally with the Headliner Award by Women in Communication, at the state level with the Prudential Spirit of Community Award, and nationally in Washington, D. C. by President Bush with the Environmental Protection Agency Award. Other individuals noticed and nominated Amit for this recognition. Each of the awards celebrated the

success and the merits of the group and individuals; the local citizens knew that students had made contributions to the community.

Replication

Any school personnel interested in replicating this type of gifted education program would need to develop five philosophical premises:

- Community definition of giftedness
- Social reconstruction
- Reflective inquiry
- Service-learning
- Political efficacy

Rather than specific steps of guidance or specific tasks to be undertaken these four premises served as a compass to provide direction to the project and kept the students on course (Figure 7.1). While the students did not use these terms, their parents possessed an innate understanding of how these ideas worked as the project unfolded. By referring their students back to these ideas, parents did little actual guidance, but greatly supported the students in their making good decisions. Without a philosophical understanding of these premises, future projects could quickly become teacher rather than student led and organized.

When giftedness is defined by the members of a community, students prove their accomplishments by the evaluation of their peers.¹ Unfortunately, the STIR students never got to see how well their peers made their presentations in the schools; they had to trust that their peers did as well in front of a real audience as they did during their practice. They had to be able to use their imaginations to perceive how this practice presentation

would play in front of other students, and the results of their efforts were measurable in an outpouring of letters to the city council comparable or superior to what an adult could have produced. Gifted students can not only accomplish tasks, but they perform asynchronous to their years and many times perform at the level of adult accomplishments. Peers and adults as members of a community can recognize and support these meritorious efforts as extraordinary.

In the STIR project, identification of students was the result of students selecting one another so in addition to creativity and ability, task commitment was extremely important.² Students selected people who could and would get the job done. David went to three schools, Abby and Wade urged students from their schools to write letters as did Lori and Rachel. Amit and Ben spoke to their peers in the second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grades and asked them to write a letter to the city council supporting a ban on smoking in public places. STIR members also got two junior high students to give presentations at their schools where they asked students to show up at the public hearing and the work session rather than to write letters.

The measure of leadership was the ability to find common ground with peers, the ability to motivate them to work to find the acknowledgement of adults as their peers, and the ability to do adult sized jobs successfully.³ As a way of thanking the students for their letters of support, Amit and Ben passed out STIR pencils, bumper stickers, and a few T-shirts. All these items helped to get the word out about STIR and also helped to remind the student participants in the program of their value. Other evidence of leadership came in tangible forms: the list of voluntarily smoke free restaurants started to lengthen due to the efforts of STIR and some schools even wanted Amit and Ben to return immediately to

speak again. By getting restaurants to voluntarily go smoke free through a public information campaign was more than anyone had expected at the beginning of the STIR campaign.

Adherents to social reconstruction believe that in a democracy students should be educated for both today and the future in order to explore and solve the problems of the community.⁴ Gifted students need to know how to organize groups to seek fellow students who can work for similar interests. They need to form action plans to accomplish their dreams in a pragmatic fashion. Students need to use their problem solving skills to tackle problems they see today and problems they will encounter in the future. The STIR students willingly turned their informational program toward political ends when they showed themselves capable of bringing public pressure to bear on the city council. Students certainly used problem solving strategies to help their community just as Americans have always formed groups to explore their common interests. DeTocqueville discussed the democratic political life of community associations in American society, and these students certainly demonstrated this as well as their willingness and ability to make a difference in both their political communities and in the democratic process.⁵ Gifted students will spend the rest of their lives solving problems in their work, home, and community.

Teachers of the gifted must be open to inquiry experiences for their gifted students.⁶ Reflective inquiry allows students to select, own, examine controversial societal issues, and reach conclusions about them. Students must identify a problem and hold it as their own. It cannot be given to them or forced upon them; when this happens the gifted child sees it as it really is – a contrived experience with little connection to the

real world. In the beginning the controversial aspect of the STIR project ground the project to a halt for a full three months. In order to get permission to enter the elementary schools, they had to reach the central offices of the surrounding school districts; getting access to see school administrators was one of the most difficult parts of the program. Only tenacity and persistence wore a path into their offices.

Service-learning allowed students to learn content from the school gifted curriculum and apply it through an action that benefits another human being.⁷ The STIR students provided the community with more information about the dangers of second hand smoke. They did not ask the council members how they would vote instead the students went through a process of listening, providing information and repeating the process to help the people involved reach a common ground. Gifted students provided a model of compassion and of caring about the community observable by their peers and the adults who surrounded them. While attending to academically rigorous subject matter and skills in the form of health issues and public policy, they also provided a service to a community that was civically turgid. When students learned the means and manner of influencing the political process, they engaged in political efficacy.⁸ Importantly for the success of the project the STIR students and the restaurant owners found common ground; by allowing people to see what interests they shared the students overcame resistance to the ordinance. Only when compromise minimized opposition could the council members agree that they passed good legislation. Gifted students need to be actively involved in politics as responsible citizens who care for the community not just as the occasional voter but as an informed decision maker who critically examines the issues and possesses an informed

opinion. They will need to use political skills to find common ground and the common wealth of democracy.

Conclusions

These students worked for a better community that guaranteed their rights of safety and clean air. When they learned about civic efficacy, they found out that they could be the instruments of change and that they held power in their government. In the process they learned a lot about civic virtue because they saw themselves as people who made a difference in the political process.⁹ Of course, the students brought a naive perspective to the legislative process, but this in addition to their youth proved their sincerity. No doubt the students were at the right place at the right time, but that does not detract in any way from the determination, the grassroots effort, or the vision of a better community. Ben said, “I always thought that politics was a little bit easier than it actually is. You have to do a lot to do what we did, but I am really proud of all of us.”

This project was important to help students understand that they can work to change their community by using the legislative process. The students developed a democratic ethic that grew and matured through their experiences. They discovered that they do have a voice in democracy, and ideally every student should have involvement in such a project before they leave school.¹⁰ Students should have access to service-learning projects in which students focus on improving and developing their community by doing real service and experiencing political efficacy skills. If the schools do not provide this type of experience, students need extra-curricular alternatives to provide them with crucial democratic political skills. All gifted students need these experiences rather than just a fortunate few, and students need deliberate preparation in practicing these political skills.

Adults can help students use extra-curricular and after school activities to learn about democracy, public safety, and clean air. After school activities can enrich the community and provide flexibility that do not always exist in the regular classroom activities. Teachers of gifted and talented students need to see that their students can and will produce civic capital if adults provide mentoring opportunities and leadership.¹¹ Students get to work side by side with adults in low ratios of adults to students; moreover, students get to work with a person with a strong background in the specific area under study. Teachers must cultivate students' interest to identify problems through reflective inquiry and refine their thoughts to produce projects that aid in social reconstruction.¹² Students get opportunities to select a problem of interest to them then have continuing input into decision making in extra-curricular activities. The fact that extra-curricular activities are voluntary is also important to them.

Well, I learned that no matter how big or how small you are, if you feel strongly about something . . . no matter how big the problem is or how small the problem is, I think you need to address the issue. (Amit)

Students understand that they can have an impact and that they can reconstruct society to improve their community. Students have ideas of what a good society should look like, and they have ideas they can carry out to achieve that vision. Teachers of gifted students can construct meaningful educational situations through service-learning projects and opportunities for political efficacy.¹³ Extra-curricular projects can implement the best practices of service-learning experiences for social reconstruction. Students can learn political efficacy while examining their issues. The passive role of public schools in this process indicates a failure to develop this process indicated a failure to develop political

efficacy, social reconstruction, and inquiry. Gifted education will need to make significant efforts to replicate projects as part of the curriculum or face the prospect of watching from the sideline as students take on such projects as extra-curricular projects outside of school. While extra-curricular activities serve an important role in social education and can be one method of attaining social education goals, educators should not confuse these activities with the role of gifted education curriculum in the schools.¹⁴ Extra-curricular projects serve a relatively small group of students and are only one step toward classroom inclusion of gifted and talented curriculum.

This project provides an example to the field of gifted education of what students can and will do to learn, to make a difference, to earn the respect of peers and adults, and to make contributions to their community. The STIR project incorporated many elements of social studies deemed as “best practices.”¹⁵ Students need to learn about and then act in their political communities. The students involved in STIR formed a community association and certainly demonstrated their ability and willingness to make a difference. The students worked politically to establish within their community a reconstructed society. The members of STIR certainly learned, made a difference, earned the respect of their peers and adults, and made a significant contribution to the human rights in their community.

Figure 7.1: Suggestions for Parents and Teachers Looking for Comparable Experiences

Community Defined Giftedness

Another example of how a community of seventh grade peers defined giftedness occurred in a gifted social studies class where students needed to determine solutions for social problems from ancient history as viewed from a modern perspective. Students formed groups and sold their solutions to the rest of the class who evaluated the feasibility of the solutions.¹⁶

Social Reconstruction

A group of seventh grade students realized their history was quickly disappearing as structures were torn down and key community informants died. They acted to interview informants and created an extremely popular book based on oral history interviews, and primary source material of a World War II army induction, training, prisoner of war, and medical facility.¹⁷

Reflective Inquiry Projects

A group of students became interested in gristmills from a class project. Their interests led to their visiting a local gristmill, interviewing the owner, determining its history, discovering how it operated, learning how it was constructed, and discovering what it would take to restore it.¹⁸

Service Learning Projects

Fifth grade students who learned about the English Colonial period learned about economics as craftsmen. To learn more about apprentices they found a master craftsman who taught them a particular skill. They further did labor for the craftsman while learning

about the content and skills of that craft before presenting their master craft for the members of the school community to inspect.¹⁹

Political Efficacy Projects

Fifth grade students learned how to be good citizens by taking on a variety of difficult projects that called them into community in their classroom. From rule making to settling disputes and from working with guests to sending their traveling ambassador around the world, students engaged in a variety of methods to experience political efficacy.²⁰

NOTES

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