

# Middle School Students Do It Right

There are myriad ways that the principles and values of sustainable development can be woven into students' learning in schools, from the adoption of school-wide mission statements of stewardship and green school goals, to interdisciplinary project-based curricula that reaches out to the community. As a worldwide movement however, sustainability education must also include the education of working citizens, business institutions and society at large. This article explores the success of DoRight Enterprises Inc., a curricular model engaging all of these dimensions, which was piloted in the H.H. Wells Middle School Enrichment Program during the 2005-2006 school year.

It is Monday morning at Henry H. Wells Middle School in Brewster, New York. Students file into their 7<sup>th</sup> grade enrichment class . . .

Rrrrrrrriiiiiinnngggg!!!!

"Good morning class, please have a seat. Today I have a very special announcement."

The class quiets down to low murmur, shuffling books, settling in.

"Starting today, from the moment you walked in that door, you are no longer students at H.H. Wells Middle School, and I am no longer your teacher."

The class is now silent and perplexed--this is obviously another silly teacher joke. What will he think of next?

"From this day on, when you enter this classroom, you are employees of 'DoRight Enterprises Inc.' This classroom is your office, and I am the chief executive officer (CEO) of DoRight Enterprises. I am your boss."

The silence is deafening. A boy in the back of the class offers curious but cautious approval, "cooooooooool...."

"Welcome, and congratulations. DoRight Enterprises Inc. is a business that makes money by selling "consulting" services to "clients." The purpose of DoRight is to help businesses learn how to increase their profits by reducing their impact on the environment and natural resources. DoRight also specializes in political action, so as a DoRight employee, you will have the choice of which department you would like to work in---consulting or lobbying."

"You will each become an expert in your field during the DoRight Training program, which begins today, and will last for 4 weeks. After your training you will be ready to work. As a consultant your job will involve making sales calls to local businesses to find a willing client (bring in your cell phones), setting up an appointment to conduct a sustainability assessment, visiting your client's site to conduct the assessment by inspecting the operations and interviewing managers, analyzing your findings back here in our office, sending letters recommending changes and finally following up with your clients for support. Your sustainability assessments will measure various aspects of your clients' energy use, waste management, procurement policies of goods purchased and sold, green building features,

cleaning chemicals, landscaping practices, and water use. As DoRight lobbyists you will research bills pending, conduct letter-writing campaigns and make phone calls to U.S. Congress members and/or hold fundraisers for other political action groups. Any questions?"

An enthusiastic student responds, "Awesome! How much are we going to get paid?"

"In our school DoRight Enterprises Inc. is a 'not for profit' corporation. We will be offering our services to our clients in the community free of charge, and you are in training, and will not be paid. If, however, you pay close attention and master the skills and knowledge in this project, you could be able to create your own business in high school that would bring in a paycheck. Seriously . . ."

And so began the maiden voyage of DoRight Enterprises Inc.

At the time, it felt like taking a giant curricular bungee jump--the unknowns were huge. Would these kids be able to pull this off? Will the businesses take them seriously? How would the logistics work out? But by the end of the year these fears would prove moot. And if I learned one thing, it is to never underestimate the ideas, energy and creativity of youth.

To date, since October 2005, nearly 300 students have conducted on-site sustainability assessments and have made recommendations for nearly 30 local businesses in Brewster, raised hundreds of dollars for the World Wildlife Fund and Defenders of Wildlife, and sent dozens of letters to U.S. Congress members and state legislators. In the process our classroom more resembled the news room of the Washington Post than room 242 at H.H. Wells Middle School, with students working independently, busy making phone calls to Washington DC, calling local clients, writing letters, analyzing data, etc. Student engagement soared. The students had a purpose--there was clearly something very special going on. Students' recommendation letters to their clients became the ultimate real world test, each explaining to their clients how a particular recommendation could save money by lowering costs and/or increasing market share, and outlining the connections between their clients' actions and environmental degradation, responsible consumption, and global issues.

And what did the clients have to say? One DoRight client, The Brewster Sports Center commented, "The students were remarkably professional and knew exactly what they were doing. They were able to point some things out that had gone unnoticed by us. As a result, we have substantially redesigned and expanded our recycling program. I think it's fabulous to have these students engaged with us like this."

As a model of sustainability education in action, DoRight Enterprises utilizes teaching strategies that are highly effective for standards-based academic classrooms as well as enrichment programs. The DoRight Enterprises Inc. application at H.H. Wells is a classic example of an interdisciplinary, project-based curriculum design with a community action component. Such designs begin with a context--a real world problem, question, or project--which generates the need to learn a particular set of knowledge and skills. In the case of DoRight Enterprises, the need for students to be effective consultants or lobbyists leads them through advanced study in all the school disciplines. Geometric sum formulas are learned to calculate and understand the depletion of global oil reserves. Algebraic models are derived to explain input/output and stock level dynamics of sustainable systems. An enhanced understanding of the structure and function of government and the legislative process is required. Professional letter writing skills

must be honed. Principles of economics, never before considered by the students, need to be learned. And last but not least, ecosystem science and the interdependence between living systems and the human built world are examined, leading to the study of ecological footprints, supply chain analysis, and more. Interestingly, the most challenging preparation for some students is gaining the confidence and professionalism to make a cold sales call to a prospective client. From start to finish however, in spite of the time spent on project-based elements, students spend most of their time applying and learning skills in their academic subject areas, with a highly relevant and motivating sense of purpose. Standards based classrooms can emphasize this aspect to

When reflecting on the richness of the academic learning in DoRight, I have been equally struck by the development of character, values, confidence and maturity in my students. Many of my middle school students feel disempowered, as though they have little say in the direction and design of the world they will inherit. The DoRight project gives them confidence, skills, and the belief that their ideas are worthy and can translate into action that can make a difference. Many students at this age are also struggling with a need to individuate from the adult world. The DoRight project capitalizes on this adolescent dynamic and provides a constructive vehicle for them to be experts, giving them license and a legitimate forum to responsibly speak truth to power in the adult world to make vital contributions. Students receive respect for their ideas, and their local community becomes connected to the process of education like never before. As I explain to my students, "when you are done with this training you will know more about these topics than 80% of the adults in your world. (A recent Roper study found that 80% of the American public clings to incorrect and outdated environmental myths). This idea is transformative and empowering for young people. As noted by a student in her DoRight summary report: "Our actions in this project will help because if enough people make a big deal about it, the government will eventually do something about it." This student shares the insight of Margaret Mead in her famous quote, "Never doubt that a small group of dedicated citizens can change the world. It is the only thing that ever has." If the result of DoRight Enterprises Inc. is any indication, the dedicated citizens that will change the world in our era just might be our teenagers, if we have the vision and courage to let them.