

INSIGHT 12: DOING RIGHT BY THE KIDS

An education reformer, Scott Beall, founder of DoRight, has a revolutionary education concept for America. DoRight Enterprises is a sustainability consulting firm, offering pro bono advice to local businesses and organizations to help them raise profits and reduce environmental footprints. What is unique about DoRight's business model is that it is entirely run by middle school students.

DoRight Enterprises was the outcome of Beall's desires to fix the educational shortcomings of American schools, coupled with his own insights from the education field on the lack of buy-in and awareness of environmental issues by Middle America. Without their wholesale support, he says, it will never be possible to achieve the kind of cuts in carbon emissions vital to stabilizing the climate system. Inspired by organizations such as the Natural Step, which provides environmental, social, and economic sustainability advice to major corporations, Beall developed DoRight Enterprises into a model for middle school students, who, he says, are "dying to speak truth to power." DoRight Enterprises was founded in 2005 with the goals of mobilizing youth action to educate and change the behaviors and attitudes of an important and large demographic with respect to environmental and sustainability issues and to reform educational systems with a "textbook example of every best practice pedagogy that schools are clamoring for." [3]

Rigorous training in systems thinking and integrating math, social studies, science, and English prepares students to choose one of three roles within the firm. Advanced applied and holistic thinking is developed through "end of oil" calculations and comparisons between industrial production models and ecosystem models. Once trained, students choose between business consulting, political action, and public relations tracks. They then perform functions within the firm ranging from doing multiple-point sustainability audits on local businesses to running letter-writing campaigns to producing films and publicity materials.

As Beall says, seventh-grade students are underestimated 90% of the time, regarding the level of complexity that they are capable of understanding. Madeline Skaller is chairwoman of DoRight Enterprises' extracurricular counterpart, the DoRight Leadership Corps, and a freshman at Brewster High School in Brewster, New York. She says her work as the sustainability auditor of the Putnam Hospital Center gave her confidence and empowered her to discover her own voice in society. With her detailed recommendations adopted immediately, she has smartly leveraged this success, talking on radio shows and presenting at conferences, discussing the role of youth in climate change solutions. "Young people can see things in a way that adults cannot," Skaller asserts, referring to the objectivity and fresh perspective these younger minds can offer to old challenges. "We need to change mindsets and mental patterns to enact change in the world." [3]

James Smith, eighth-grade student and DoRight Enterprises consultant, offers an analogy to illustrate this fresh perspective regarding generational responsibility and the current state of the environment: "It's like when your mom is going to drive you and your little brother to a party. You are all set to go, when you go in the kitchen and find that your older brother has made a huge mess and he's leaving. At this point, you've got two options: You could sneak out, go to the party and have a good time, leaving your little brother at home to take all the heat for it. Or, you can stay, clean up, and even if you can't go to the party, you know your little brother can. The moral of the story is: if you can't fix it, stop breaking it. Many people in my generation can't decide what choice to make, but if the older brother stays, maybe we will have an easier time choosing." [3]

There are nearly 30 million people in the United States between the ages of 12 and 19, Beall asserts—a massive untapped resource. The long-term, four-year mission of DoRight Enterprises is to populate all the cities in this country with DoRight consultants. People will listen to this age group, Beall says; it breaks the psychology of denial in adults to hear them speak this truth. As Suzuki Roshi said, "In the mind of the beginner there are many possibilities, in the mind of the expert there are few."