

# Middle School Students Do It Right

BY SCOTT BEALL

There are myriad ways that the values and principles 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 in Brewster, New York, during the 2005-2006 school year.

*It is a Monday morning in October 2005 at Henry H. Wells Middle School. Students file into their 7th grade enrichment class.*

*"Good morning class, please take your seats. Today I have a very special announcement."*

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

*"Starting today, you are no longer students at H.H. Wells Middle School, and I am no longer your teacher."*

*The class is now quiet, the students intrigued. Is this another silly teacher game?*

*"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'm your boss."*

*The silence is commanding. A boy in the back offers 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 four*

## Brewster pilots an interdisciplinary, project-based curricula to the advantage of students and local businesses

*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 (please 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, being in training, will not be paid. If, however, you pay close attention and master the skills and knowledge involved with this project, you could potentially create your own business in high school that could 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.



CELf shares its national spotlight on SIRIUS Satellite/LIME Radio with students from the DoRight™ Enterprises program at H.H. Wells Middle School, Brewster, NY

Would these kids and I be able to pull this off? Would businesses take them seriously? How would the logistics work? By the end of the year, these fears would prove moot. If I learned one thing, it is to never underestimate the ideas, energy and creativity of youth.

Since October 2005, nearly 300 students have conducted on-site sustainability assessments and 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 newsroom of the *Washington Post* than Room 242 at H.H. Wells Middle School, with students working independently, making phone calls to Washington, D.C., calling local clients, writing letters, analyzing data, and more. The purpose-driven learning caused student engagement to soar; there was clearly something very special going on. Students' recommendation letters to their clients became "real world" tests, each detailing how various proposals could save money by lowering costs and/or increasing market shares, and outlining the connections between their clients' actions and environmental degradation, responsible consumption and global issues.

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. Its 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 that generates the need to learn a particular set of knowledge and skills. In the case of DoRight, 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 need to be learned. And last but not least, ecosystem science and the interdependence of 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 cold sales calls to prospective clients. 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.

What did the clients have to say? Christine Reger, of 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."

When reflecting on the richness of the academic learning in DoRight, I've 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 percent of the adults in your world." (A recent Roper Center study found that 80 percent of Americans cling to incorrect and outdated environmental myths.)

This idea is transformative and empowering for young people. Echoing the sentiment in Margaret Mead's famous quote, "Never doubt that a small group of dedicated citizens can change the world. It is the only thing that ever has," one student, in her DoRight summary report, commented, "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."

If the results of DoRight Enterprises, Inc., are any indication, the dedicated citizens who will change the world in our era could be our teenagers, if we have the vision and courage to let them.



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