

Helping underachievers 'get traction'

New York Teacher - January 16, 2009



For her Walkabout community service learning project last fall, the high school senior worked at a farm that trains horses for such uses as therapy for autistic children. Photo by Maria Bastone.

Lee Cutler remembers his epiphany in the fall of 1977 on a grueling wilderness trip somewhere deep in the Catskill Mountains, early in his senior year of high school.

Looking around at the classmates and teachers he was already bonding with in a brand-new experiential learning program, the kid who always felt isolated and disconnected in middle school and high school knew he had found "the better place."

"That's when I realized that school is supposed to be a community," said Cutler, who has built his career — as a teacher, local union leader and now as NYSUT's secretary-treasurer — on the academic and life skills he acquired at Putnam/Northern Westchester BOCES' Walkabout program.



Still close to Walkabout, NYSUT's Lee Cutler traveled to northern Westchester County to meet Elise Rojas.

Designed for college-bound seniors who — in the words of its co-founder — "haven't gotten traction" in a traditional high school setting, the innovative program combines academics with experiential learning to help bright but often underachieving students develop the confidence, skills and direction they will need to succeed throughout their lives.

"Community is a very important part of the educational experience," said Eugene Lebwohl, who retired in June as the program's longtime director. "Many of the students here are deeply moved by the quality of the community they discover, in a place where they undergo common, challenging experiences."

At Walkabout, two concentrated blocks of traditional academics are augmented with academic content that is woven into other key elements of the program: a community service project; a midyear career internship; a large-group presentation; and two confidence-building wilderness backpacking trips.

Wherever the learning takes place, five teachers and five teaching assistants help students acquire life skills — handling responsibility, identifying and achieving personal goals, taking risks and learning to work — the skills Lebwohl says are as important as academic skills.

A member of the United Staff Association at P/NW BOCES, Lebwohl helped create the program in 1977 with Peter Copen, who also has since retired.

The pair was inspired by an article about the Australian "walkabout," a tribal rite of passage among aborigines in which adolescents spend time in the wilderness, demonstrating their competence and marking their emergence as adults.

More than 90 percent of Walkabout's graduates go on to college. Since 1977, the program has grown from 20 students to about 55, the most that can be accommodated effectively, said Lebwohl. He is currently helping train his successor, Melissa Hardesty, a former high school social studies teacher in Port Chester and high school assistant principal in Connecticut.

Named one of the top 40 experientially oriented educational programs in the U.S. by the National Institute of Education, Walkabout received a boost of legitimacy early on from State Education Department evaluators.

They found that in addition to academic gains commensurate with those of traditional high school control groups, students who completed Walkabout gained measurable increases in self-confidence and motivation levels.

Although validated by State Ed as a model for replication, the full-blown Walkabout program has yet to be re-created in New York. However, Lebowhl noted that some elements unusual in 1977 — community service and internships, for example — are now common to many schools.

Other programs challenge students to set and meet specific goals. And BOCES centers and big-city high schools have created career and technical education programs that integrate credit-bearing academic content into hands-on vocational training.

While a lack of resources has created an achievement gap for many students in high-poverty districts, Cutler believes countless students in well-funded districts are hamstrung by a different but equally destructive achievement gap. "They never realize their potential because they don't belong in a traditional setting," he said. "For some of us, education has to be experiential and tactile."

Concerned about "the kids who just never get traction," Lebowhl agrees. "We lose some of them as dropouts, certainly," he said. "But what is also tragic is that so many of them just simply lose their love of learning. They lose confidence in the educational process."
— John Strachan

To read the article that inspired the Putnam/Northern Westchester program, go to www.self-directedlearning.com/walkabout.html.

Five 'challenge environments'

- Wilderness experience: Students first begin challenging themselves, setting goals and working together as a community on a weeklong fall backpacking trip in the Catskills. A second trip takes place in the spring, this time in the Adirondacks.
- Service learning project: In October, students spend six hours daily, four days a week, at a community service project designed to help them develop organizational and planning skills while learning that an individual can make a contribution. It also earns them social studies and English credit.
- Academics: In addition to two 10-week blocks of academic classes that can provide four to six Regents credits, academics are integrated into all aspects of the program. Classes also deal with skills needed for career and personal success, including time management, working with others and creating a resume.
- Career internship: At midyear, students apply their new skills and confidence to the often-challenging task of securing a nine-week internship. Recent internships have had students working in Africa and Central America.

- Presentations: For some, this is the ultimate test of the confidence they have gained during the year. Every student must give a 12-minute oral presentation on their growth and accomplishments before an audience of 100 or more people.

For more information

- For advice on starting a similar program in your district, you can contact EugeneLebwohl at 914-945-0780 or e-mail him at walk2about@igc.org.

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