

Educating Our Youth

by Ramona K. Mullahey

It is imperative that cultural literacy, that is, an awareness of a community's history and current day influences shaping the environment, be nurtured in the classroom as early as the elementary level.

Information presented as part of standard curricula, such as social studies or environmental education, provides a foundation for future decision makers. Such education prepares citizens for assuming responsible citizenship and environmental stewardship. The immediate environment of the neighborhood becomes a learning laboratory, a living textbook for the history and culture that shapes a place and a community.

Planning commissioners and other lay board members can provide the insights of their rich experience to motivate local school boards and systems to incorporate and infuse knowledge of the built environment into existing curricula.

The current reform and restructuring of education nationwide presents an opportunity for providing direct community input to persuade local school authorities and other decision makers of the importance of built environment education. The value of educating our young people and listening to their concerns is irrefutable. Our decisions shape the communities that our children will inherit. They will make their decisions based on the foundation that we leave them. What we do today delimits their options for tomorrow.

Several cities have incorporated input from school age kids in their comprehensive planning efforts. Gresham, Oregon, a community of 100,000, established a year-long "Envision Gresham" project to encourage elementary and high school students to articulate their vision of Gresham for the year 2020. The young people responded with poems, posters, drawings, essays, and even two plays.

The city of Toronto involved nearly 8,000 kids to guide planners in the preparation of a new official plan for the central area. These students participated in six projects: a student conference on urban issues; a two-day workshop where teams

important in both planning and program implementation. This kind of partnership ensures that sustainable programs are developed.

The goal of educating students for democracy is an important mission of the entire school community. The social studies curriculum including history, civics, geography, and environmental studies is pivotal in this mission. Social studies provides the place for the open discussion of democratic ideals, practices, and processes.

Planning commissioners and board members can be vital resources and catalysts in nurturing this discussion, and in showing how democratic processes are applied to clarifying and resolving actual community issues.

We all need to work with our schools to motivate students to participate in their communities as informed citizens analyzing contemporary community issues, developing needed critical thinking and discussion skills, and positive attitudes to making a difference.

Our communities can be used as learning laboratories, as primary sources for providing insights and practical, real life examples of themes currently taught in education. ♦

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"built" a new city neighborhood using lego blocks; a survey to identify places, buildings and neighborhoods they liked; an exhibition of more than 200 paintings, models, plans, essays, murals and poems; role playing a development game, where students prepared a redevelopment proposal for waterfront lands; and an in-class assignment where students prepared their own official plans.

Loveland, Colorado, developed a citizen-based planning effort, "Agenda for the 90's and Beyond." Young people provided valuable input in the development of the vision and goals to help guide the community into the future. Every high school in town was surveyed and presentations made to four elementary schools where third graders shared their concerns for Loveland's future. Ninth grade students also designed a weekly call-in talk show for teens (with the Agenda and the school system as advisors and co-sponsors).

In each of these projects, the full participation of local school boards was

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