

In this issue...

Programs that emphasize leadership skills and personal development are essential components to a middle school students' academic achievement. Part 2 of this review of the research by Tracy Walker, activity advisor in Novato, CA, examines the benefits of a student leadership program to the students involved.

The Benefits of Student Leadership Programs

Leadership has been defined in a variety of ways by scholars of leadership philosophies. However, one common theme among the definitions is the concepts of leaders, followers, and the interaction between them (Karnes & Bean, 1996).

Leaders are not born, they're made. Leadership can be learned and taught (Connaughton, Lawrence, & Ruben, 2003). It is similar to other abilities that are learned in a classroom setting, i.e., mathematical computation, reading fluency, musical composition, and athleticism. However, leadership was once solely considered an innate tendency (Stodgkill, 1948). Today, the common belief is that leadership is a series of behaviors learned largely through experience and making mistakes (Economist, 2003).

Leadership competency is also one of the categories in the federal government's and some states' definitions of qualifying students as gifted. Furthermore, some states acknowledged the need for leadership education, and have adopted leadership skills development into the state curriculum frameworks (Rogers, 1991). Bloomstran compiled the following information (as cited in Klesse, 2004, 97):

New Jersey's standards ask the students 'use critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving skills.' Alaska's Department of Education says, 'Students need skills in working on teams, in problem solving about their work, in recognizing quality work.' Performance goals in Missouri state that 'students in Missouri public schools will acquire the knowledge and skills to make decisions and act as responsible members of society.

The Virginia Board of Education has also recognized the importance of leadership instruction, and has implemented an approved, yet optional, leadership development curriculum. The introduction to the program states (Commonwealth of Virginia Board of Education, 2003):

The role of leadership has been vital to the

development of our state and nation and will be critical in meeting emerging and future challenges. American society requires that students become informed and active participants in every aspect of their lives. In recognition of the important role that effective leadership skills play in providing today's students an advantage in tomorrow's competitive world, we approve ...this curriculum as a model for schools to use in preparing ...students for their individual and group leadership responsibilities.

Leadership programs provide opportunities for students and teachers to address state and federal educational standards using real life experiences. These experiences strengthen what is learned in the classroom and allow students to apply their new-found knowledge both in and out of a school setting (Klesse, 2005).

Elements of a Leadership Program

Several components make up an effective middle school leadership program. A team of youth leadership directors created a condensed list of five principles that provide the framework for a successful program (Woyach, 1996, p.1-2).

1. Help youth learn specific knowledge and skills related to leadership.
2. Promote awareness, understanding, and tolerance of other people, cultures and societies.
3. Emphasize experiential learning and provide opportunities for genuine leadership.
4. Involve youth in collaborative experiences, teamwork and networking with peers.
5. Involve youth in significant relationships with mentors, positive role models, or other nurturing adults.

These are guidelines used to assess a leadership program or class, and can be used to ascertain a

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program's strengths and weaknesses instead of an expectation that a program is able to cover all areas (Woyach & Cox, 1996).

Upon completion of a leadership class, students have been exposed to the essential elements of leadership development. Woyach (1992) broke down the elements into the following: envisioning, decision-making, negotiating, motivating members, creating an image for others to support, advocacy, and coalition building. These elements can be attained in a well-organized leadership class.

Benefits for Leadership Students

Inherently, students participating in a leadership class receive the same benefits as their peers in the student body. Leadership students participate in many extracurricular activities in addition to class requirements. Participating in more than one activity has better outcomes than only participating in one (Barber, Stone, & Eccles, pg 16, 2003). In fact, the wider range of extracurricular activities a student participates in, predicted greater school attachment, higher GPA, and greater likelihood of college attendance. Students who are involved experience personal growth, positive adolescent development, and a sense of empowerment. For example, students who held office in high school said they felt that they had more influence on making a difference in their schools and in their personal lives. They also experience democracy firsthand while being viewed as representatives for the remainder of the student body (NASSP, 2002). Combined, these effects can lead to higher self-esteem.

The type of activity chosen by the student is associated with higher levels of education (Holland & Andre, 1987). Spady (1971) found that males involved in a leadership or community service activity were more likely to reach their educational goals than if they were solely participating in athletics.

Klesse also deems that middle schoolers benefit from participation in a leadership class because it fosters independence and they become more engaged in their schooling. It also allows students the opportunity to actively participate in the decision making and implementation processes that are necessary to further one's leadership skills. Being involved in a leadership class reinforces these newly acquired leadership skills on a daily basis (Fiscus, 1995).

Being involved in an organized group, such as

leadership, has a lasting impact on students. In fact, in a 1987 study by Ladewig and Thomas, adults remembered the school clubs and organizations that they belonged to 25 years ago, which demonstrates the connectedness they felt to their affiliations. Students tend to identify with their school through participation in a club or on a team (Klesse, 2005). The study went on to explain that if a student is involved during his/her school age years, then he or she will more likely hold membership and be a club officer in adulthood.

It is during this time of adolescence that students are beginning to search for and develop their identity. Youniss, McLellen, and Yates (1997) claim that adolescence is the time to present the idea of civic identity to students. One way to initiate the idea is to have students work together to implement a large project like a school carnival. This introduces students to the idea of "the bigger picture" and the role they play in the project. Students enhance each other's talents for a shared goal. Together students will become empowered with the realization that they aren't powerless because they are "just kids", but in fact, very powerful and can have long lasting effects on others (Youniss et al., 1997).

Leadership students experience increased social ties, and bond to the school and its staff (Darling, et al, 2005). These students are exposed to the school's adult-oriented values and expectations, establishing a window to the "adult world." Furthermore, leadership students have more contact with staff members and administrators, which makes them feel recognized rather than the "invisible student" (Sherrill, 2000). This idea is supported by Eccles (2003) finding that participating in leadership and other extracurricular activities influences the relationships students form with teachers and their school.

Leadership students become familiar with everyday, real life, business experiences. Students are expected to learn tasks that adults take for granted, e.g., making a business phone call, writing thank you letters, and writing speeches (Rogers, 1991). Expectations are high when a student is placed in a leadership class. Students now realize that they are responsible to their school, transitioning from "renters" to "owners." They want to prove themselves to peers and staff that they can be responsible for the power that has been entrusted to them. Students recognize that they are not just representing

themselves but the entire student body and strive to fulfill the expectations placed upon them (Trafford & Griffiths, 2004).

Among elective course offerings, leadership programs are not the first priority for many school administrators. However, programs that emphasize leadership skills and personal development are essential components to a middle school students' academic achievement, as well as their attitudes regarding school. Furthermore, involvement in a leadership class can strengthen students' self-confidence and create a greater sense of connection to school. A well-run leadership program can make a significant impact on a student's life in high school, college, and later on, adulthood.



Tracy Walker (tracy_walker@hotmail.com) is a teacher and activities director at Sinaloa Middle School in Novato, CA. She has taught for 10 years at the same middle school she attended as a child. This article is excerpted

from her thesis entitled *The Value of Leadership* completed for her Master's Degree last year.

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