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## *The MicroSociety<sup>®</sup>* *Program*

### **A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A MICROSOCIETY<sup>®</sup> PROGRAM SCHOOL**

Imagine that you are in a public elementary school somewhere in the United States and it is 7:45 a.m. School begins at 8:00, but already there are many teachers and students in the halls and classrooms, preparing for a new day. Everything seems normal as you walk around, until you pass a classroom and look in. There you see what looks like a television studio, with a dozen TV monitors spread around the room, several cameras, and many switches and dials. There are about 20 children of various ages scurrying around. Five of the children are sitting in front of some complicated-looking equipment, intently studying screens and adjusting controls. Suddenly, a 4-foot tall girl calls out, "Practice!" Then she counts down from 10, and a run-through for the morning show begins.

The title of the first segment is "Sittercize." Three kindergartners demonstrate various exercises while sitting in chairs as a recorded voice describes each routine. Then there is a pledge of allegiance, and you see an American flag waving in the breeze on all the monitors. Next, you see four kindergartners with sandwich boards do a weather report segment called "Pee Wee Weather." An announcer who is to give the daily lunch menu quickly follows them. Then there is a commercial, sponsored by the IRS (Internal Revenue Service), encouraging the students to pay their taxes

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and providing instructions on how to do it. The final segment presents another student announcer, who reads off "Important events on this date."

At 8:10 a.m., the actual show begins. A closed-circuit TV broadcasts it into all of the classrooms. The children watch intently as everything goes according to plan. There is just one problem. Something is wrong with the sound. It seems slightly distorted. The "soundman," a fourth grader, frantically tries to fix the problem, but nothing seems to help. When the show finally ends, you observe the soundman hitting his head repeatedly against his desk in exasperation. Two teachers, who up to now have done almost nothing, go over to him, put their arms around him, and offer gentle words of encouragement. Soon, the soundman recovers. Another day at a *MicroSociety*<sup>®</sup> program school has begun.

### Life in the Classroom

The rest of the morning seems like any traditional public school. The children study reading, math, science, and social studies. However, as you visit various classrooms and listen carefully, you notice that occasionally there is something a little different. In one class, the children are studying simple math. However, instead of presenting problems on the board in the conventional way, the teacher refers to the *MicroSociety* program and asks, "What percentage do we pay in income tax in the *MicroSociety*?" "Twelve percent," responds one student. The teacher then begins to teach the children how to use what they have learned about percentages to compute their own income taxes in various ways.

In another class, the children are studying the Whiskey Rebellion as part of their social studies curriculum. The teacher asks, "How many of you think the farmers in western Massachusetts were right to resist paying a tax to the new government?" All the children raise their hands. Then the teacher says, "Well, what about in our *MicroSociety*? Do we pay taxes?" The children nod. "Why do we pay taxes? What is the money used for?" Several hands go up. One of the students says that some of their tax money goes to pay for the court, specifically the salaries for the judges, bailiffs, clerks, and other court personnel. The teacher then asks, "Is the court a good thing? What would happen if we didn't have a court?" More hands go up. The consensus is that the court is a very good thing and that the *MicroSociety* could not function very well without it. Now the teacher returns to the Whiskey Rebellion. "Ok, so what about the new government back in the late 1700s? Didn't they need money for courts also? And to get that money, didn't they need to collect taxes?" After some more discussion, the teacher asks the original question again. Now all students but one decide that the farmers were wrong to resist paying taxes.

## Micro Begins

And so the day goes—normal except for the occasional reference to “MicroSociety.” After lunch, however, something very different happens. It is 1:40, and there is still about an hour left of school. However, the teachers tell the children to put away their work and to “get ready for Micro.” At 1:45, you hear a bell ring, and all of the teachers and children spring into action. However, they do not leave. You see some of them move desks and chairs around in several of the classrooms. In the lunchroom, dozens of students of all ages are scurrying around and putting up what looks like storefronts. Within 5 minutes, the lunchroom becomes a marketplace, and children in storefront booths begin to sell various items to other children who hurry into the lunchroom. The buyers have checkbooks and a local currency that looks like play money but which the buyers exchange for actual goods and services in the marketplace.

As you continue to walk around the marketplace, you find many kinds of stores. In one, the children are paying to have their faces painted. In another, children as young as kindergarten use their special currency (which they call the “Micro”) to buy buttons with witty slogans. In another store, students pay to have their nails painted by other students.

You see only three teachers in the lunchroom, and they are just standing around observing. Occasionally, one of the students will go up to a teacher and ask a question, but most of the time the teachers just try to stay out of the way. The students, not the teachers, seem to be in charge here.

You leave the marketplace and begin to walk around the rest of the school. In one of the classrooms, you notice that a dozen children are busy working at computers. You see a sign that announces this is the office of the local newspaper. You go up to one of the children, a third grader who is typing away at one of the computers, and ask her what she is doing. “I just did an interview with the principal, and I’m typing it up for our next edition. Excuse me, but I can’t talk anymore. I have a deadline.” As you look around the room, you see some children run out with notebooks and pencils in their hands, and others come in and sit down at computers to type up more stories. Again, there is a teacher present, but she does not seem to be in charge. She seems to be more of a consultant.

In the room next door, you notice a sign above the door that says, “Manufacturing.” You walk in and see children busy making some of the craft items you saw for sale in the marketplace. A teacher walks up to you and mentions that the students are particularly busy and excited today because they have just received a contract to make the costumes for the school choir’s concert, which is coming up in just 2 weeks. In addition to the teacher, two parents help the children whenever they encounter a problem with an item.

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### Crime and Punishment

As you walk away from the manufacturing room, a student dressed in some kind of official-looking uniform comes up to you and asks to see your pass. You notice he has a badge that says "Crimestoppers." You have no pass; however, another similarly dressed student comes up and says it's okay, you are an authorized visitor and don't need a pass. A third student walks up and tells the other two students to resume their patrol. You discover that this is the chief of the crimestoppers. You ask him how he likes his job, and he admits that it is challenging. "I've been having some trouble because the other kids find me too bossy, but I think I'm getting better at it. Our facilitator has been talking with me about the problem and helping me to be less bossy." The chief then suggests that you visit the courtroom, where kids go if they receive a citation for breaking a law.

You enter another classroom that is set up very much like an adult courtroom. There is a raised platform at one end with a desk, and behind it sits a fifth-grade girl in a long, black robe with a gavel in her hand. Next to the desk is a seat where a somewhat younger student sits. He clearly is a witness sitting in the witness box. To the side, there are seats behind a rail. You realize that this is the jury box. In front of the judge's stand, there are two tables, with student lawyers sitting behind them facing the judge. One of the lawyers gets up and goes over to the witness box, where he begins to question the witness. You take a seat in the section reserved for spectators and listen to the proceedings. You discover that this particular case involves two students who were working together in class one day, and one wanted to see a paper that the other was working on. However, the other student did not want to show it to him. Therefore the first student took the paper away from the second student. The second student then hit the first student on the head with a clipboard. A crimestopper saw her and sent her to court. The trial ends as you sit and watch, and the jury walks out of the room to deliberate. They return in about 10 minutes. You listen intently as the foreman reads the verdict: guilty as charged. The student judge then hands down the punishment: The guilty party must pay a fine of 500 Micros, which you learn from a fourth grader sitting next to you is the equivalent of about 5 weeks' wages. You ask your new friend who makes the laws, and she directs you to the library, where the student legislature is in session.

As you enter the library, you notice that there are 24 students sitting at tables down at the far end of the room. The legislators have just assembled, and the president, a sixth grader, finishes writing the agenda on the board. The first item of business is what to do about the Micros left over from the previous semester. After some lively discussion, the representatives decide that they will consult with their classes and then come back to discuss the

matter and make a decision. The next item on the agenda is to go over the calendar for Micro for the next 3 months. The legislators run out of time before they are able to deal with the last item on their agenda, which has to do with “the check-forging problem.” The president announces that they will put off discussion of that issue until the next meeting.

It is 5 minutes before school is to end for the day, and the students and teachers dismantle their miniature society as quickly as they erected it. When the final bell rings, the school again looks very much like any other public school in America at the end of the school day. However, you realize that it is not like other schools. It is something different. It is a *MicroSociety* program school.

## THE ORIGINS OF THE *MICROSOCIETY*<sup>®</sup> PROGRAM

In 1967, George Richmond had just graduated from Yale College and was in his first year of teaching. He was assigned to a fifth-grade classroom in Brooklyn, New York. Almost all of his students were from impoverished families who had only recently arrived in this country. Many of those families had become fractured and dysfunctional due to the strains of immigration and poverty.

Like many inexperienced teachers who find themselves in a less-than-ideal urban school, Richmond was struggling just to maintain some semblance of order in his classroom. The students had quickly sized him up and decided that here was the kind of teacher with whom they could have some fun. Within a few weeks, Richmond had just about abandoned any attempt to teach the students anything. His main concern was to try to regain enough control so that no one would get badly hurt, and he was failing more often than he was succeeding.

One night, as he wearily returned home from school on the subway, a radical idea came to him. He would turn the classroom into a kind of miniature society, at least for part of the day. It would be like “Monopoly,” in which students would buy and sell sections of the classroom to each other. They would earn the money to do so by fulfilling basic attendance and achievement requirements. Richmond quickly printed up some money to use for the new activity, and he presented the plan to his class the next morning.

Although the students were suspicious at first, they soon became engaged in the activity, as almost any 10-year-old would. As the days passed and the activity unfolded, it evolved and became more complex. For instance, the students became embroiled in conflicts over their commercial transactions. Rather than become the arbiter, Richmond used the conflicts as “teachable moments.” He explained to the students that such conflicts

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occurred in any society, and this is why citizens created laws, courts, and law enforcement agencies. If the students wanted to reduce the number of conflicts and deal with them fairly, they would need to create a constitution for their society. Then they would need to have a legislature, laws, and ways of enforcing the laws and adjudicating conflict. The students loved it. The process continued to unfold, becoming more engrossing—and educational—each day.

As the students became absorbed in their new activity, the classroom became more orderly. Many of the students actually seemed to look forward to coming to school. In addition, Richmond discovered that he could use the students' experiences in their miniature society to help them appreciate the value of what he had been trying to teach them. Suddenly, math and reading seemed to be useful and important. Social studies made more sense because it involved events and processes that were occurring right in the students' own society.

The miniature society not only provided examples that Richmond could use in teaching math, social studies, writing, and other subjects, it also began to change the culture of the classroom. The students became engaged in school and the learning process as never before, because now they had new ways to succeed. They also came to view learning as desirable for getting ahead, because those who possessed academic skills tended to be more successful.

For instance, there was Ramon, the student who became the society's banker. He got the job because he was the only student who could add, subtract, multiply, and divide. Prior to becoming the banker, Ramon was at the bottom of the status hierarchy within the student group. He was the one whom other students most often picked on and harassed. However, his role in their miniature society helped him to become one of the most respected students in the class.

One day, Ramon came to Mr. Richmond with a problem. He was having trouble collecting on loans that his bank had made to some students in the class. Richmond asked Ramon whether he wanted Richmond to collect for him. However, Ramon had a different idea. He wanted to employ Emilio, the class bully and the largest kid in the class, to help him collect from the other kids. Richmond found it an intriguing idea, especially because Emilio previously had been one of the chief tormentors of Ramon. Now they would be allies rather than adversaries. The plan worked. More important, such incidents taught the students vivid lessons about the values of cooperation, tolerance, and diversity; and they helped transform the atmosphere of the classroom. The miniature society in George Richmond's class transformed the classroom from an unruly, chaotic mob into a "context of productive learning" (Sarason, 2002).

Richmond eventually wrote a book about his experiment in that Brooklyn classroom (Richmond, 1973). After teaching a few more years, he returned to graduate school to secure a doctorate in education, and he went on to serve in a number of administrative positions at both the local and state levels. He did not write any more about the “MicroSociety,” but interest in it was percolating.

## THE *MICROSOCIETY*<sup>®</sup> IDEA SPREADS

In 1981, the city of Lowell, Massachusetts was under pressure from the courts to desegregate its schools. Like many other school districts facing such a mandate, Lowell decided to adopt a magnet school plan. There would be a variety of schools with different themes, and each school would be open to any student in the district. The hope was that each magnet school would attract a diverse group of students. One of the themes selected was “the city.” The original notion was that the “City Magnet School” in Lowell would be a school without walls. The city itself would be the school, with students and teachers working and observing in various locales around the town. This plan, however, soon proved to be impractical. When the planners learned about Richmond’s “MicroSociety” concept, they decided that they could accomplish their purpose by basing the entire school on it. In the fall of 1981, the City Magnet School in Lowell opened its doors, becoming the first schoolwide *MicroSociety* program.

During the next decade, the Lowell experiment began to attract national attention. Popular news shows featured it, such as Peter Jennings’s nightly network newscast and the “MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour.” *Time Magazine* and other print media highlighted it as well. Educators throughout the country became interested in establishing their own *MicroSociety* programs.

Richmond was spending much of his time responding to requests for information and assistance as other schools began to adopt the idea. Therefore in 1991, he and his wife,Carolynn King, established a small nonprofit organization to provide technical assistance and networking opportunities to schools that wanted to adopt the *MicroSociety* concept. (Carolynn King was an attorney who became interested in educational reform and went back to graduate school to earn a master’s degree in education.) In the summer of 1993, they organized the first national training conference for educators and parents interested in learning more about the *MicroSociety* program idea. Attendance was good, and MicroSociety, Inc. (MSI), continues to hold a national conference for up to 400 educators each summer.

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In 1998, the federal government approved *MicroSociety* program as a “comprehensive school reform model.” This meant that qualifying schools could receive up to \$150,000 over 3 years from the government if they adopted the *MicroSociety* program. This further spurred growth of the model. Within a few years, more than 200 schools in 40 states were employing the *MicroSociety* program.

Although the founder originally developed the model in an urban setting and many of the subsequent *MicroSociety* programs were in inner-city schools, there were many suburban and rural *MicroSociety* programs as well. Its appeal seemed to cut across class, regional, and ethnic lines. It also seemed to work well for a variety of ages. Students as young as kindergarten were involved, along with eighth-grade middle school students. About 60% of the programs are in elementary schools, and the rest are in middle schools.

As the model spread, it continued to receive recognition and support from different quarters of the educational community. For instance, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory approved the program for inclusion in its *Catalogue of School Reform Models*. In addition, MSI received support from numerous foundations and corporations, such as Morgan Stanley, IBM, ARCO Chemical, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

### THE GUIDING PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THE *MICROSOCIETY*<sup>®</sup> PROGRAM

The *MicroSociety* program is based on two basic assumptions about learning. The first is that “real, sustained learning takes place when students are intrinsically engaged and motivated (usually in ways that are relevant to their lives) and experience successes in the process” (C. King, personal communication, January, 2005). The second is that children learn best by playing, working, doing, and reflecting.

In addition to these two assumptions, the *MicroSociety* program is based on a few guiding principles. The first is, “Empower the children. It is their society.” What this means is that a good program is student run. The role of the teacher is not to solve problems, but to help students do so. As Richmond succinctly put it, “If you don’t know what to do, ask the students” (Richmond & Richmond, 1996, n.p.).

A good example of this first principle was the program in which students who ran their own businesses initially went to a teacher if they encountered a problem. The teachers became increasingly overwhelmed and worn out from all the requests for help. Finally, they created the role of student manager for the mall, and student business owners who had a

problem would go first to the mall manager for help. This change not only alleviated the strain on the teachers but also provided a more powerful learning experience for many students.

Second, problems that occur in the *MicroSociety* program are opportunities to learn. Rather than viewing such problems as potential calamities to be avoided, teachers and principals should view them as “teachable moments.” The idea is not to create a smooth-functioning, problem-free society that dazzles the eye with its many fine ventures and agencies, but rather to create a realistic world in which students find themselves immersed in processes that provide rich opportunities for learning. As the *MicroSociety*<sup>®</sup> *Handbook* puts it, “The process is vastly more important than the product; indeed, the imperfections in the process lead students themselves to take charge and make it work effectively” (Richmond & Richmond, 1996, p. 3). The important thing in Micro is not the destination, but the journey.

In one school, the principle was put to the test when a student named Anton had a business that was failing. Some of the teachers wanted to intervene so that the business would not fail. However, they realized that allowing Anton’s business to fail would be the best way of showing him what went wrong. So they allowed the business to fail, and when Anton started his second business, he refused to hire his buddies, who had a history of being troublemakers, and he changed his own behavior as well. The second business thrived, and Anton learned some important lessons about life.

The third principle is that learning in context is more effective than trying to learn facts in isolation. What this means in practice is that teachers should use Micro to make *all* learning activities more meaningful, including those that occur in the traditional classroom. There should be many connections between what the students are doing in Micro and what they are doing in their regular classes during the rest of the day. For instance, when students learn about percentages in their math class, the teacher might have them take out their Micro bank accounts and use percentages to compute how their interest payments would change with changes in the interest rates.

Fourth, educators cannot create a viable *MicroSociety* program without active community partnerships. As Richmond wrote, a Micro is like “stone soup. Everyone in the community brings his or her own ingredients to add to the soup. The more people contribute, the more delicious it will be” (Richmond & Richmond, 1996, p. 15). It is impossible for a group of teachers to know everything that one needs to know in order to help students create a viable society. Bankers, lawyers, police officers, and business people of various kinds must share their expertise. In addition, even though students do most of the work, it is difficult for teachers to carry the whole

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burden of organizing the program on their own. Parents and others in the community provide valuable hands-on help when it comes to establishing the different ventures or agencies and keeping them going.

*MicroSociety* program flexibly takes on a somewhat different shape at each school. In addition, once implemented, a *MicroSociety* program constantly evolves as students confront new problems and figure out their own solutions for dealing with them. Nevertheless, every *MicroSociety* program has certain common features.

### BASIC ELEMENTS OF THE PROGRAM

During most of the day, a *MicroSociety* program school looks and functions like any other school. However, during the last hour of the day, the entire school becomes a society that is run by the students. Students in “Micro” do just about everything that people do in grown-up society: They have jobs, own and operate businesses, and make laws enforced by their own police force. They have courts, banks, and post offices. The “essential elements” are an internal currency, retail and labor markets, government agencies, nonprofits, businesses, and private and public property, along with parent and community involvement.

Like any society, the foundation of the *MicroSociety* program is its economic and political systems. Students earn money in a variety of ways. First, they receive a certain amount of money for attending school, turning in their work on time, and performing other duties associated with the student role. In one school, for instance, the students received five Micros for each period of class that they attended, and they received bonuses for special accomplishments such as an A on a test or helping another person in an unusual way. The teachers pay the students with a local currency that often has a colorful or meaningful name.

However, students also have jobs for which they are paid salaries; and as they become more skilled in their jobs, they stop getting paid for attendance, homework, and other student-related behavior. As in any society, there are literally hundreds of different kinds of jobs. Students may work as bank tellers, court bailiffs, or bakers. They may be journalists, manufacturers, or production assistants in the Micro Theater. Students also can start their own businesses, and when they do, they often employ other students. In their businesses, they make goods, sell them, and/or provide services. All students go to the marketplace at least once a week in order to buy the goods and services offered by their peers, using the money that they earned in their jobs or business ventures.

## The Economic System

The heart of the economic system is the bank. Like the banks that grown-ups use, the *MicroSociety* program banks issue checking accounts and personal and business savings accounts to customers. The accounts pay monthly interest. The banks also issue loans, for which they charge interest.

As in the adult world, students in every *MicroSociety* program must pay taxes. There usually is an income tax, and the legislature must determine collectively what the rate will be. Then there is an "Internal Revenue Service" to collect the taxes. In some schools, the IRS must collect and keep track of income taxes, sales taxes, and business taxes. The IRS even uses W-4 and 1040 forms to manage the tax collection process in some schools.

The businesses in a *MicroSociety* program are numerous and varied. Many of the ventures involve manufactured items that students sell in the marketplace. These include posters, sports cards, origami, bird feeders, T-shirts, battery-charged race cars, and marionettes. Among the more creative ventures are a nursery where students grow and sell various kinds of plants and a venture in which a student made and sold an exercise video.

Often the most popular items for sale in a *MicroSociety* program marketplace involve food. In almost any *MicroSociety* program marketplace, one will find restaurants or food stands selling everything from pickles to potato chips. One school had a food court with 16 different concessions, including a root beer float stand, a pizza place, a popcorn stand, and a grilled cheese sandwich concession.

As in grown-up societies, many successful ventures in a *MicroSociety* program involve services and entertainment, rather than manufactured goods or food. There are puppet theaters, magic shows, art galleries, and travel agencies. There are companies that provide face painting, hair braiding, and manicures. In one school, there was a *MicroSociety* program chorus where students auditioned and then sang at various events throughout the year. In another school, there was a theater company where students wrote, produced, directed, and acted in skits and plays.

Health also has been a theme in many ventures. In one *MicroSociety* program, there was a "Wellness Company," which was a health center with a focus on exercise and nutrition. At another school, there was a health clinic where students worked as doctors, dentists, and nutritionists and performed health checkups on other students with real medical equipment.

The ventures often make connections with what students are learning in their academic classes. For instance, at one school, a multicultural education teacher helped a group of students to develop a "travel agency" venture for their *MicroSociety* program. Students paid to "visit" different countries whose cultures they were studying in their social studies classes. At another school,

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the science curriculum inspired a business called “Bug Hang Out,” where students displayed and sold bug-related items. (The “Bug Greeting Card Series” was especially popular.) Other products included “Bug Books,” which the students wrote themselves. Students visiting the Bug Hang Out also could examine a bug model under a magnifying glass.

Many *MicroSociety* programs also have private, nonprofit ventures that model the value of community service. In one school, there was an ice cream social to reward students who had participated in service learning projects. It was completely student run. In addition to the ice cream, there were tattoo booths and a DJ. Another school put on a *MicroSociety* program charity ball. To attend, students bought tickets with their Micro money, and the proceeds helped the *MicroSociety* community in various ways.

### The Political System

As important as the economic system is the political system, which is based on a constitution that the students create themselves in a “constitutional convention.” Each constitution is different, but it usually establishes some kind of elected legislative body and an executive. The constitution often is an elaborate document, and the students spend many weeks creating it and seeking the consensus necessary to adopt it.

The *MicroSociety* program’s own legislature makes its laws. The student representatives meet regularly to debate many of the issues that confront any society. For instance, in one school, there was dissatisfaction with the salaries that some of the heads of the public agencies earned. Legislators were especially unhappy that the chief of police earned more money than they did. However, the chief’s allies prevailed when they pointed out that the police force generated more income for the government through citations and fines than any other government agency.

Every *MicroSociety* program has a police force that enforces the laws established by the legislature. Often referred to as “the crimestoppers” or “peacekeepers,” they enforce the school’s laws by handing out citations to students who break the rules. Some of the rules relate specifically to Micro, such as being away from one’s venture without a special pass. Other rules are more general, such as no fighting.

Students who receive a ticket for breaking a rule usually must go to court, where there is a trial with a judge, prosecuting and defense attorneys, and a jury. *MicroSociety* program courts also handle civil disputes, such as a conflict between a shopkeeper and a customer or between an employee and an employer. The court system relies on a cadre of judges,

lawyers, clerks, bailiffs, court recorders, and juries. To prepare for their duties, the student judges and lawyers learn civil and criminal law as well as procedures for filing complaints and participating in hearings, pretrial conferences, and trials. The lawyers sometimes must pass a “bar exam” testing their knowledge on the laws and procedures before they are allowed to practice.

Training is important for many other jobs in a *MicroSociety* program. Blocks of time often are set aside at the beginning of the year and at other times throughout the year for the students to learn the special knowledge and skills needed to perform their jobs and function as effective citizens. Schools often refer to this training activity as “Micro Prep.” In one school, the first 8 weeks of the fall term were devoted to training for Micro. During this time, all the students attended sessions covering topics such as “ethics” and “check writing.” Students also learned how to present themselves in job interviews, open bank accounts, and calculate their taxes. In addition, the students who were going to manage business ventures attended a weeklong training session on “business planning,” which was conducted by adults from the local Junior Achievement organization.

Students as young as prekindergarten have participated in Micro. The youngest students (kindergarten through first grade) often are “consumers.” In one school, they learned about money—how to use it, why it is good to save it, and so on. They also learned about rules and the function of the crimestoppers. Like the older students, they were paid a certain number of Micros each month for attending school regularly and doing their work in the classroom. They used the Micros to pay for taxes, rent, and tuition. Then they went to the marketplace twice a month, where they used their money to purchase goods and services offered in ventures run by the older students.

### **Adult Roles**

Teachers in a *MicroSociety* program are supposed to assume the roles of facilitators and consultants. Once they provide the students with training in how to operate their agencies or ventures, the teachers step back, but they do not completely withdraw. They continue to be available for consultation and guidance. For instance, in one *MicroSociety* program venture, two students spent most of their time “gossiping” instead of working. Rather than deal with the problem herself or ignore it, the teacher facilitator met with the president of the company and helped the president to think through various ways in which she might deal with the problem. By gently and skillfully asking questions and reinforcing good ideas that

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came from the president, the teacher helped the president come up with her own solution to the problem.

Some ventures do require more teacher supervision. For instance, in the IRS, the students have to labor constantly to keep up with the paperwork, so the teachers find that they often have to supervise more closely there. However, in the ideal *MicroSociety* program, the teachers spend most of their time observing, encouraging, and gently guiding. They also look for curriculum connections and instructional opportunities. Like management consultants in the adult world, they have special expertise and experience that they can offer the students to help them manage their society more humanely and effectively; but the responsibility ultimately is the students.' The students, not the teachers, run the *MicroSociety* program.

A *MicroSociety* program also provides many opportunities for parents to become involved. In some schools, the parents help by constructing the storefronts, courtrooms, and mailboxes that provide the *MicroSociety* program with a greater degree of realism. Parents also can help with training. For instance, in one school, a parent who was a self-employed computer consultant spent several hours each month training the teachers and students in how to run businesses. In another school, a group of parents worked in the companies and agencies along with the teacher facilitators and student employees. The parents even received wages paid in Micros and had their own checking accounts at the Micro bank. They used the money to purchase items for themselves and their children at the Micro marketplace.

Community partners also are a vital component of any *MicroSociety* program. They provide both expertise and financial support. Bankers come into the school and help the teachers and students to set up the *MicroSociety* program bank. Then the local bank may continue to provide support by printing the currency and checkbooks. Judges and lawyers often come into the school to train the teachers and students who work in the court. In addition, officers from the local police department frequently come into the school to train the crimestoppers. In some schools, the police department even donates equipment and supplies that the crimestoppers use in their work. Meanwhile, local merchants help by furnishing food for the food court ventures or supplies for the manufacturing businesses.

Despite the many permutations, the basic elements found in every authentic *MicroSociety* program are an economic system with its own currency and a variety of businesses, a legislature based on a written constitution and supported by taxes, laws enforced by a police agency, and the continuous involvement of parents and community partners. Using these elements and the guiding principles, teachers and students at each school create their own version of the *MicroSociety* program.

## ***MICROSOCIETY*<sup>®</sup> PROGRAM OUTCOMES: WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS**

To what extent are students in *MicroSociety* program schools more motivated to learn? Do they learn higher-order thinking skills? What about the *MicroSociety* program's impact on social and emotional competencies? How do students in *MicroSociety* program schools compare with other students when it comes to learning basic subjects such as math, reading, and writing?

### **Impact on Academic Skills**

A number of evaluation studies have examined at least some of these questions. The *MicroSociety* program's impact on basic academic skills has received the most research attention: A number of different evaluation studies suggest that the *MicroSociety* program can help students to master the kinds of academic skills measured by standardized achievement tests. Data also strongly suggest that the program often improves school attendance and student conduct in school. There also is some indication that an effective *MicroSociety* program in a school can help increase teacher expectations for student performance and improve staff morale and cohesiveness.

Research on the first schoolwide *MicroSociety* program provided encouraging results. When Lowell's City Magnet School opened, it had full enrollment; and even 20 years later, there was a long waiting list of applicants. This was an important outcome in itself, because the district had implemented a citywide magnet program in which parents were free to send their children to any school. To be successful, a magnet school had to attract a diverse group of students. The *MicroSociety* program at Lowell clearly did so. But City Magnet did more than just compete favorably with other schools in attracting students. According to an unpublished report, a 1988 evaluation of City Magnet School found that eighth graders tested on average at the 9.3 grade level in reading and at the 10.4 grade level in math. Furthermore, these results reflected the best schoolwide performance in the city. The school's 96% student attendance rate also was the highest in the city.

Although these results are impressive, the Lowell experiment was unique in many ways. The first school to develop and implement a new educational practice often achieves impressive results, only to have subsequent efforts to replicate the original experiment fall short. The real test of a reform strategy is whether the positive impacts show up in schools that attempt to replicate the prototype. To what extent have other schools been able to match City Magnet's success with the *MicroSociety* program?

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The research evidence suggests that a number of schools across the country have achieved similar results. An independent research organization reviewed the data from seven different evaluations of *MicroSociety* programs conducted between 1996 and 2002. They found that there had been an average improvement per year of 29% in reading and 42% in writing. Some schools did even better than that. For instance, at an elementary school in West Virginia, between 1997 and 2000, the test scores increased from 44% of the students reading at grade level to 60% (Arete, 2002).

The *MicroSociety* program schools also saw gains in math and science. The average improvement per year in math was 35%, and in science, it was 158%. At the school in West Virginia, the math scores went from 46% to 72% between 1997 and 2000, and in an elementary school in Detroit, the scores went from 9% to 56% in science during the same period.

In two schools, the researchers were able to conduct a more rigorous evaluation involving a comparison group. In one, a middle school, reading scores for the Micro group increased 12% in reading in 1 year compared with 0.3% for the comparison group. (The comparison group consisted of students in the same school who did not participate in Micro.) In the other, an elementary school, the difference was 4% improvement in writing for the Micro students compared with 0%. In this second study, other students in the district made up the comparison group (Arete, 2002).

The improvements in student performance associated with the *MicroSociety* program often occurred in schools with high percentages of disadvantaged children. For instance, an elementary school in Detroit had a student body that was 86% African American and 14% Bengali. Ninety percent of the students were from economically disadvantaged households. Nevertheless, after the school implemented the *MicroSociety* program, their students showed gains of 43% in math, 53% in reading, and 24% in science in just 1 year (Arete, 2002).

There also is the school in El Paso in which 97% of the student body were members of minority groups and 87% from economically disadvantaged homes. One year prior to implementing the *MicroSociety* program, only 29% of the students met state standards in reading, and only 33% met standards in math. After 5 years of the *MicroSociety* program, 92% of the students met state standards in reading, and 93% met the standards in math. (These data came from annual reports prepared by the school staff for local and state educational authorities.)

One problem with this kind of research is that there often are many other changes occurring in a school that implements a reform such as the *MicroSociety* program. Therefore it is difficult to attribute all of the positive gains to just one of those changes. A principal at one of those schools acknowledged this when she said that the improvement in student scores

at her school really was due to the “whole community taking responsibility for all the children.” However, she went on to add that the *MicroSociety* program had done much to contribute to those positive changes in the school’s climate. For instance, she noted that with the *MicroSociety* program, “Teachers from different grades work together in ventures where they see kids from different classes and grades,” and this helped create a caring community within the school.

The positive results relating to student performance are especially impressive because Micro does not directly target student test scores. Other reform models seek to teach directly the kind of information that is covered on the tests. Some even teach students test-taking skills. Micro does neither. Its impact is more indirect: It encourages students to come to school; it increases student interest in learning; and it provides students with additional opportunities to practice the basic skills that they learn in their classes and that the tests cover. The data indicate that these indirect effects of the program are powerful enough so that achievement test performance goes up when students participate in Micro, even though the program does not explicitly target such outcomes.

### Nonacademic Outcomes

The data also suggest that the *MicroSociety* program can match other successful educational reforms in student test performance while producing a variety of other positive outcomes as well. Two of those other positive outcomes associated with the *MicroSociety* program involve student attendance and conduct. In one nationwide survey, every *MicroSociety* program principal reported improved attendance and reduced disciplinary infractions after program implementation. In another survey, 9 of 10 schools reported attendance increases (Arete, 2002). The results for a middle school in Iowa were typical. Following implementation of the *MicroSociety* program, average attendance increased from 74% to 98% in 1 year, and disciplinary infractions dropped from 6,234 to 1,802 over a 4-year period. The school previously had 17 active gangs; after 4 years of Micro, it had none.

In addition to the hoped-for improvements in student achievement, attendance, and discipline, the *MicroSociety* program also seems to have had a positive impact on teachers and parents. Here, the data are more anecdotal, but they are compelling.

A positive, unexpected outcome of the *MicroSociety* program involves teacher cohesiveness and collegiality. In several schools that implemented the program, the staff reported that teachers became more supportive of one another. For instance, after visiting a school in Iowa, a reporter wrote,

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Because all the teachers work cooperatively on *MicroSociety* program, whether they teach science or special education, they've gotten to know and appreciate one another more. In weekly meetings there is no longer a concern that one teacher may encroach on another's territory (Poole, 1996, p. 1)

There also is evidence that the *MicroSociety* program can rejuvenate some teachers, helping them to become more enthusiastic and committed to teaching. For teachers who have become dissatisfied with teaching in the traditional classroom, *MicroSociety* program can provide an alternative source of fulfillment and an antidote to burnout. As one teacher put it, "Teaching should be exciting." He then went on to say that what he was most excited about was his venture in Micro. Another teacher admitted that Micro was "a lot of work," but then said, "It's worth it because of what it does for the kids."

One other way the *MicroSociety* program seems to affect teachers is through its impact on teacher expectations. Research on learning has consistently suggested that teacher expectations are critical for student learning. When teachers expect more from students, student performance improves (Weinstein, 2002). A number of teachers with whom I spoke said that they had raised their expectations for their students because of what they had seen them do in Micro. In some cases, the teachers' behavior in the regular classroom reflected this change in their view of the students.

The Micro program also has had a positive impact on parents. First, it provides a vehicle for positive parent involvement. In a school serving a largely disadvantaged population, the parent coordinator said that many parents cannot read and this discourages them from becoming involved with the school. Nevertheless, they do come to the school in order to help with Micro, because they know they do not need to be able to read in order to be helpful there. In one case, a parent began to work in the program as a volunteer, then became a coteacher, and eventually became an assistant to the program coordinator. She also went back to school to secure a teaching credential, in large part because of the positive experiences she had had through helping with Micro.

The program also can help parents develop some of the same academic and practical skills that their children are learning. For instance, one school served an impoverished community made up largely of immigrants from Mexico. In this community, most parents did not have checking accounts. Some did not even know what a checking account was. However, because of the *MicroSociety* program, children learned about checking accounts, went home, and taught their parents.

## THE PROBLEM OF IMPLEMENTATION

Many schools have seen positive results when they have successfully implemented the *MicroSociety* program, but not all schools have been able to do so. One evaluation study found “wide variety among schools in the fidelity of their implementation of the *MicroSociety* model” (Arete, 2002, p. 1). In addition, the research indicates that the program’s impact on student learning has varied. For instance, one review of the studies found that while 11 schools showed gains in reading tests, 4 did not. And even when schools have implemented the program with high fidelity and the documented impact on learning and behavior have been impressive, it has not always been sustainable over a long period of time.

There are many reasons why some schools are able to implement and sustain the program with high fidelity and positive results while others do not. In the next chapter, I discuss the major challenges that schools have encountered in trying to implement and sustain the *MicroSociety* program. Then, in the next section of the book, I present three case studies that depict the experiences of individual schools when they set out to implement the *MicroSociety* program. In one case, the effort was successful, and the school sustained the program over a long period. However, in another case, the attempt ended in failure; and in the third case, the school terminated a program despite its success. Together, these case studies highlight the obstacles and challenges involved in trying to implement change in public school environments. The case studies also reveal the factors that help schools to succeed.

## CONCLUSION

The *MicroSociety* program transforms the school into a miniature society run by the students themselves. It has all the components that one would find in any adult society, including an economic system with its own currency, banks, and businesses and a political system with a constitution, laws, legislature, and courts. Students earn money through work and use their money to buy goods and services provided by other students. As students assume more responsibility, teachers become facilitators and consultants. There also are roles for parents and community partners.

The *MicroSociety* program concept began in the late 1960s in a fifth-grade classroom in Brooklyn, New York. Since then, it has spread to more than 200 schools in 40 states, and the federal government has approved the program as a “comprehensive school reform model.”

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A number of studies indicate that when schools are able to implement it effectively, the *MicroSociety* program can have a positive impact on both academic and nonacademic outcomes. However, not all schools have seen equally impressive results. Ultimately, the impact of the program depends on how well schools are able to implement it. Thus for the *MicroSociety* program, as well as many other educational reforms, it is important to understand the typical challenges that schools encounter in trying to implement the program.