



The Harvard Crimson

ONLINE EDITION

News

Citizen Schools Livens Up Learning

Boston afterschool enrichment program provides hands-on apprenticeships to inner-city kids

Published On 11/30/2006 3:33:33 AM

By **ADITI BALAKRISHNA**
Crimson Staff Writer

Not many Harvard undergraduates can say they have argued a case before federal judges or have built an award-winning robot—but these kids can.

Through Citizen Schools, a Boston-based non-profit enrichment program, middle school students have the chance to participate in interactive apprenticeships that immerse them in a variety of professional and academic fields.

Founded over a decade ago by Eric Schwarz and Ned Rimer, alumni of the Graduate School of Education (GSE), the program currently mobilizes teams of volunteers from at least three of Harvard's graduate schools to conduct academic apprenticeships.

Local professionals and community leaders also team up with the young students to work on projects ranging from producing a music CD to hosting a golf tournament.

"This is a really pivotal time in kids' lives, where they are really craving a connection to the adult world," Rimer says. "It is an opportunity where they can really light the light bulb of learning and develop a real sense of mastery through these hands-on apprenticeships."

A WORLD OF 'WOWs'

Citizen Schools aims to engage middle school students in learning by developing leadership skills, facilitating access to resources, and building integrated communities, according to alumni coordinator Mara R. Schanfield.

The Boston program requires students to participate in structured afterschool activities for about 16 hours every week during each semester-long session, Schanfield says.

Students participate in two apprenticeships each semester led by adult volunteers, known as citizen teachers, who are experts in their respective fields.

Schanfield says that the program is always looking to increase its collaboration with Harvard and other local institutions of higher learning.

"Kids don't necessarily wander through Harvard Yard every day, but it is basically in their backyard,

Schanfield says. "We love exposing kids to college."

In 2005, Harvard Medical School research fellow Paul A. Ardayfio and colleagues began a Citizen Schools apprenticeship that allows students to investigate the effect of drugs on the brain with researchers from Harvard teaching hospitals.

According to Ardayfio, over 15 Harvard affiliated students, staff, and faculty have participated in this apprenticeship during the last year-and-a-half.

At the end of each semester, students showcase their new knowledge in a culminating project called "WOW."

"When people see what the kids can do, they say, 'Wow!'" Schanfield explains. This fall's showcase will take place on Dec. 16 at Northeastern University.

According to Ardayfio, his greatest moment as a mentor was seeing the students "speak excitedly and confidently about difficult science topics that I didn't learn until I was in college" during their final presentations.

Graduate students from the Kennedy School of Government are leading an apprenticeship this semester, teaching students to run mock campaigns. This fall, a team from the Graduate School of Design (GSD) is also guiding eighth-graders in drafting designs to present at the City-Wide Design Showcase at GSD on Monday.

ON THE RIGHT TRACK

Schanfield says that Citizen Schools focuses on the middle school age group because it is a critical time during a child's educational life, despite being largely neglected in favor of enrichment programs for older and younger students.

"If kids get on the right trajectory to success in middle school, they will do better in high school," she explains.

In the Boston public school system, eighth graders can choose to apply to high schools outside their district, a process that often requires a great deal of guidance, according to Schanfield.

In order to address the challenges of the high school application process, Citizen Schools devised a special track called 8th Grade Academy (8GA) in 2001, according to Director Tony R. Dugas.

8GA engages students in hands-on learning and motivates them to apply to top-tier, college-track high schools in the area to increase their chances for future success, says Dugas.

"We help them navigate the system. Our top goal is to get 100 percent to enroll in top tier high schools," explains Tasha B. Patusky, the high school and opportunity specialist for 8GA.

Students in the program are also trained to be "savvy consumers" of statistics, analyzing real data on local high schools to make informed decisions about where to apply, Dugas says.

All 8GA students participate in a special apprenticeship with lawyers from Boston law firms, the Office of the Attorney General of Massachusetts, and the Boston Bar Association to hone their persuasive writing skills.

"It makes the work they're doing in school relevant to their futures—that's why apprenticeship learning for this age group is so powerful," Rimer says.

AIN'T NO MOUNTAIN HIGH ENOUGH

At this year's Citizen Schools Gala in May, 8GA alumnus Hugo D. Desius said he aspired to be a doctor and that the program was key in developing his ambitions.

"In Haiti they say 'Dye mon, gen mon'—beyond the mountain is another mountain. That means that in life there is one challenge after another," Desius says. "Citizen Schools has helped me climb one mountain. It also prepares me and thousands of others to climb the mountains ahead. We will."

An ongoing evaluation of the program conducted by Policy Studies Associates, a research firm in Washington D.C., demonstrates that Citizen Schools participants have higher in attendance rates, lower rates of suspension, and higher promotion rates compared with a matched group of peers at Boston public schools, according to the program's Web site.

The study also showed that 72 percent of eighth graders who completed the program chose to attend top-tier high schools, versus 32 percent of eighth graders who did not.

Akiyah B. Francis-John, a high school junior and 8GA alum, says she believes in the impact of Citizen Schools. Francis-John has returned to the program as a mentor and serves as a deputy team leader for an apprenticeship examining women's physical and mental health.

She says that many of the students at her high school who did not participate in Citizen Schools are lacking in the skills that she developed through the program.

Since its establishment, the organization has grown to serve 3,000 students and has branched out to 30 programs in five states, according to Colin S. Stokes, marketing and communications manager for Citizen Schools.

Stokes says the organization has ambitions of growing to 80 program sites in 40 communities by 2010.

"We are all passionate about something," writes Ardayfio. "What could be better than sharing that passion with young people?"

<http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=516080>