
Work Experience in the Elementary School

A Successful Experiment

By George R. Knight

Sometimes you get into trouble when you open your mouth. Harry Rogers can vouch for that. Rogers—the seventh-grade homeroom teacher at the Berrien Springs, Michigan, church school—innocently suggested at a faculty meeting that more could be accomplished in the school's practical-arts program if students worked in smaller groups. The result: he got the job of teaching practical arts to 60 young people in grades six, seven, and eight.

That was six years ago. Since that time Rogers has developed an innovative and successful work program for elementary students.

The idea is deceptively simple. A half-page article featuring the program in the Benton Harbor-St. Joseph *Herald-Palladium* noted that the students "are getting part of their education in 41 stores and businesses in the community."

Participating students work from 12:30 to 2:30 every Thursday afternoon in such places as grocery stores, a nursery, a furniture store,

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the local hospital, bakeries, restaurants, Andrews University, and a number of other businesses. They perform a variety of tasks, including stocking shelves, helping with deliveries, typing and filing, and many others. The students work for free, but they are given school grades.

Rogers' objective is to get students into the community so that they can experience a taste of what the real world of work is all about. Beyond this, the program aims at teaching young people "work habits and techniques." All of this, he asserts, is better accomplished on the job than in the classroom.

"The most difficult part of the project," claims Rogers, "is the first three months." After presenting the program to the school board for its approval, the next steps were getting the students enthused and interesting local business people.

Skiping School—and On-the-Job Experience

It isn't generally difficult to develop student interest. After all, most of them are quite happy to escape the classroom one afternoon per week! Chuckie Knauff—a student at the Berrien Springs school—put it nicely: "I get to learn new types of work habits and meet new people while I am skipping school a half day." Beyond this "benefit," and more important, the program gives students a chance to advertise their work abilities and gain on-the-job experience—factors that often put them on the inside track for subsequent summer and after-school employment. Many of the students have been successful at landing paying jobs at places where they first worked for free as part of the school's program.

Rogers has found that most students are enthusiastic about the program. However, those students who don't want off-campus work have the option of work at school (e.g., teachers' aide work, secretarial

tasks, or maintenance work), classes in practical arts (e.g., typing or sewing), or classes in arts and crafts. These classes are often taught by retirees or carefully selected volunteers.

During the 1985-1986 school year, the Berrien Springs school had 60 students working in the community and about 10 participating in classes and work at the school. Rogers is careful to impress upon the students that the success of the work-experience program in the community rests with each one of them.

Getting Started

Getting local businesses and tradespersons to participate is not as difficult as one might think. Many possibilities exist in the local congregation. Beyond that, business acquaintances of the teachers and board members may be interested in obtaining some "free labor" while performing a community service. In addition to these sources, the young people themselves often know per-

sons in the community for whom they would like to work.

Not all business people (including Adventists) jump for joy at the opportunity, but, Rogers says, many of them can be won over if you are positive, enthusiastic, and don't force them into a position where they have to say no. Before they reach that point, thank them for their interest and ask if it is all right to drop by in a month or two.

The obvious place to start is with those people and organizations that are most favorably disposed toward the school and its work program. After such participants have had successful experiences they can be used as references for the program to businesses that are more skeptical. Rogers claims that it is not unusual for those who have reluctantly agreed to take one student to call back and ask for more. The program grows over time. Experience suggests that it is best to start with the eighth-graders and eventually include the seventh- and sixth-graders as openings permit.

At registration each year, the students fill out a "Wish Sheet" that tells them what types of work activities are available. Each student selects and orders by rank the six jobs he or she would most like to perform. Rogers' goal is to place each student in his or her preferred work experience for at least two of the four grading periods. In most cases he is able to accomplish this for three out of the four quarters of the school year.

Parents Enthusiastic About Program

On the back of the "Wish Sheet" is the "Parents' Approval Sheet." No student is allowed to participate without parental approval. The great majority of the parents are enthusiastic about the program. In fact, the work program is often an influential factor in helping parents decide to send their children to the school.

Young people stay on the job for nine weeks. Then they move to another job, even if the employer wants them for another quarter. Rogers explains to the employers that the purpose of the program is to develop breadth of experience, but

that the student will be able to spend another quarter with them next year if they so request. In this rotating program a student can have up to 12 different work experiences over a three-year period.

One of the program's secrets of success is regular contact between the teacher and the employers. Rogers not only sets up the work program with each employer at the beginning of the year, but also visits each establishment for a few minutes during the practical-arts period at least twice a month. This lets both the employers and the students know that he has a definite interest in the quality of work being done.

Grading Procedures

The employers have the responsibility of grading each student. The grade report has a place for a letter grade, but it also evaluates such items as "shows initiative at work," "is industrious and hardworking," "has good attitude toward work," "shows thoroughness (finishes tasks)," "relates well with supervisor," "relates well with other workers," and "is truthful and honest." These items, rated on a scale of

one to five, provide the teacher with a basis for counseling the student.

Unfortunately, not all students work successfully in the program. Some have been "fired"—sent back to school. These students receive an "F" and also lose the privilege of off-campus work for the rest of the quarter. They are given another opportunity during the next nine-week period. Several students have found this "firing" experience to be brutal, but realistic. Learning from the experience, they have determined not to repeat it.

Near the end of the second semester, the school shows its appreciation for participating employers by sponsoring a banquet in their honor. Each participant receives public recognition and is made to feel a part of the school family. The banquet builds goodwill and, incidentally, provides a bridge for setting up programs for the next year.

The results of this work experience have been overwhelmingly

positive. Even though three or four businesses have pulled out and a few students didn't succeed, most businesses, pupils, and parents have expressed a growing enthusiasm for the program.

The students have gained valuable work experience, a chance to advertise their work abilities, opportunities to put book knowledge to work, and an inside chance at future part-time work. The businesses have gained free labor and the gratification of being of service to the community. In addition, the school has gained invaluable public relations (the SDA school is viewed more as a part of the community rather than "that little school over there"), business friends who are much more willing to help it in its fund-raising projects, and increased enrollment from homes that appreciate its program.

Three of the best things about the program are that it costs next to
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Getting to skip school may be a factor, but this student also enjoys working on a printing press.

What about all the wiring for such a system? Wouldn't this be a hazard? The system I have just described would not require wiring. The same technology that runs most television remote control units could send infrared communications between the computer and the touchpads. And the hassle of changing batteries in the touchpads can be eliminated if the units are solar powered, thereby charging their own batteries from available light.

At this point, I can hear teachers moaning, "I'd have to be a programming genius to set up and operate a sophisticated system like that!" But they wouldn't. To prepare a test, the computer's quiz maker asks them to type in the questions, the possible answers, and how they want to respond to a wrong answer. Other applications could be just as simple with appropriate software.

With the above scenario, the computer benefits the teacher and every student instead of only dealing with one or two children at a time. As a result, one or two computers in a school can have a significant impact instead of the too-little, too-late roles they often play. Cost? Thirty to 40 dollars per keypad. Availability? None. But if you think the idea would be useful in your school, write to us. We may be able to get someone to develop the software and the touchpad system to implement such an application.—
Dave Ruskjer. □

The author is publisher of *Journal of the AMCA (Advanced Microcomputer Concepts and Applications)*.

Work-Experience Education

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nothing; it fulfills an important goal of Adventist educational philosophy, and it can be implemented in any

school, regardless of size. This last point is of special importance, since most Adventist schools are small and cannot afford a lot of expensive equipment. The work experience program is made to order for the small school. The smaller the school, the easier the program is to implement, since fewer students need to be placed. On the other hand, it is not difficult to operate the program in a larger school, since there are more teachers who can help in the placement process. In terms of cost, the Berrien Springs school allocates \$500 per year to operate the entire program. The only expense has been \$10 per week for bus transportation to those businesses that are a great distance from the school.

How to Begin

Anyone interested in starting a work-experience program can purchase a booklet, *Step Ahead With Practical Arts*, by writing Harry Rogers, Seventh-day Adventist Church School, P.O. Box 230, Berrien Springs, Michigan 49103. The cost, including postage and handling, is \$2.25. □

Interaction, Service, and Outreach

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ment. They can fulfill this requirement by participating in the activity themselves, or by assisting in its organization and supervision. Students are to keep logs of their activities, and report back to the teacher on a bimonthly basis. Possible options may include: officiating or assisting in the operation of intramural programs at local elementary or middle schools; becoming a junior leader at a YMCA or YWCA; helping special education students prepare for events in the Special Olympics; taking swimming lessons or helping teach swimming classes

sponsored by the Red Cross; riding in a local horse show or working as a volunteer for the county park service in a recreation program. These activities take place after school hours and require no school transportation.

Math and Geography

Teachers from these two areas may choose to work together for one of their projects. They could plan an orienteering course at a local park. Students from their classes will correspond with math and geography students at neighboring high schools, extending invitations to come out and try the course. The academy students will pair up with the visitors and go through the course with them. This activity will be scheduled two Sunday afternoons a month. Students provide their own transportation to the park.

Bible Classes

Sophomore Bible and Art I Class—These two classes can combine their efforts to create and produce a traveling gospel puppet show. The themes, typesetting, scripts, puppets, and stage props are all developed by the class members. Students can write to various non-Adventist schools and churches within a 50-mile radius, describing the Gospel Puppet Hour and offering to perform. Performances will be limited to one per week, and students from the two classes travel with the show on a rotating basis. (No more than one-third of either class should be on the road at any one time.) Bus or van transportation is provided by the school.

Senior Bible Class—Students from this class can join forces with local volunteer organizations such as the Salvation Army, Red Cross, American Cancer Society, United Way, and Candystriper organizations at local hospitals. They are to donate an average of eight hours per month