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Annual Report to Health and Education Leadership for Providence (H.E.L.P.)

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RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN
Center for the Advancement of Art & Design Education

PROJECT NEW DIRECTIONS

AN
ANNUAL REPORT
TO

HEALTH AND EDUCATION LEADERSHIP FOR PROVIDENCE

H.E.L.P

SUBMITTED
BY

Dr. Paul A. Sproll, Director
Center for the Advancement of Art & Design Education

June 8, 1998

Students as Museum Tour Guides

With HELP's approval, and using the unexpended funds from our 1996-1997 grant, we once again invited the city's art teachers to participate in the *Students as Museum Tour Guides* project. Because of the various demands on our time, it was agreed with the RISD Museum's Department of Education that they would take responsibility for the management of the project. *Project New Directions* would, however, maintain oversight over the project and would require the Museum to provide us with participant evaluations and invoices at the conclusion of a block of school visits.

The following nine (9) schools participated: Charles Fortes Elementary, Alfred E. Lima Elementary, Vartan Gregorian Elementary, Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary, Sackett Street Elementary, Veazie Street Elementary, Webster Avenue Elementary, Nathanael Greene Middle, and Roger Williams Middle. Three (3) schools: Sackett, Webster and Greene, each conducted two (2) tours. A total of 391 students participated in the tours, with 58 students being trained as tour guides. *A full listing of participating schools and the focus of their tours is included in the appendices of this report.*

Following each tour, evaluations were completed by the RISD Museum docent, the art teacher and the student tour guides. A sample of evaluations is included in the appendices of this report. By all accounts this was a successful project. Evaluations indicate that the teachers and RISD docents pretty well agree that in terms of communication and preparation the program is effective. At least one docent speaks of the difficulty in reaching a teacher at school - something which is of no surprise to those of us who work closely with public schools. Several docents suggest that it would have been very useful if they knew more about the teachers' curriculum. I think this is a suggestion well worth careful consideration, as it would enable the Museum docent to better meet the teachers' curricular needs. There is also the suggestion that it might be beneficial if the program were to require additional training sessions for the student tour guides.

As one reviews the list of topics covered by the tours one is left wondering to what extent a specific tour connects and complements a school's curriculum. With Providence's recent production of district-wide *Outcomes, Assessments and Teaching Strategies (OATS) Frameworks* it would also be interesting to see how a specific tour might be designed to meet a framework's outcomes and indicators.

It is clear, however, that this project has done wonders for the self-esteem of those students selected to become tour guides. They report that the single most important part of the program was when they took their own classes on a tour! The elementary school tour guides report that their peers had enjoyed the visits, while the middle school guides generally felt that their peers either didn't enjoy or only partly enjoyed the tour. I guess this is not too surprising, as students of middle school age are often a *hard sell*, and quite a challenge to motivate. One middle school student might though have the answer to this apparent apathy when he suggests in his/her evaluation that the program could be "like funerals" (sic).

While I believe that the program was successful on several levels for the participating schools, particularly those who had involved art teachers and classroom teachers in the tours. I have to admit to being surprised and disappointed that when given an opportunity such as this we were not overwhelmed with applications to participate! There are more than 40 schools in the district, yet only 9 are represented in this year's round of tours. While one can speculate that prevailing conditions within a school might legislate against teachers getting involved in such an initiative, I still have to wonder what it will take to cause teachers to think of a project such as this a *remarkable* opportunity with which to bring their instruction *alive*.

It saddens me that there were sufficient funds for 5 more tours to have taken place, but no more teachers apparently interested in pursuing the project - even with an incentive of a stipend for planning and all other costs including transportation paid by the project! When teachers gather to discuss the woes of their professional experiences they often speak of a lack of curricular support and a lack of funds. The *Students as Tour Guides* project provided both, yet we had in my opinion a dismal response rate. The malaise that this suggests prompts me to conclude that teachers' unwillingness to involve themselves in opportunities beyond the normal scope is most probably endemic of far reaching systemic issues.

Designers in Providence Schools

Design and architecture are rarely taught as part of the visual arts curriculum in America's schools. The *Designers in Providence Schools* project, which is generously funded by the Health and Education Leadership for Providence (HELP) Coalition, provides the art teachers of Providence Public Schools with a unique opportunity to collaborate with a design professional in order to introduce design to their students.

We are currently in the process of creating a publication that will highlight the work carried out by the students in the following five (5) schools: Edmund W. Flynn Elementary; Carl G. Lauro Elementary; Oliver Hazard Perry Middle; Feinstein High School, and Hope High School. The project supported two (2) initiatives in Carl G. Lauro Elementary.

The *Designers in Providence Schools* project had the following objectives:

- To establish collaborative working relationships between designers and architects and K-12 public school visual arts educators.
- To motivate and empower K-12 visual arts educators to incorporate the study of design into their curriculum planning and instruction.
- To provide K-12 public school visual arts educators with support for design-based curriculum implementation.
- To increase students' awareness of the role of architects and designers and design in everyday life.
- To develop students' awareness of how architects and designers solve specific design problems.
- To develop students' confidence to tackle design problems, either working individually or collaboratively.
- To develop students' awareness of criteria by which to judge "successful" design solutions.
- To engage students in conversations surrounding the interpretation of "meaning" in design.

At the outset, I have to once again report a level of dismay at what I consider to be a paltry response by the art teachers to what we believed would be a wonderful opportunity with which to enhance a teacher's instruction. At no financial cost to the teacher or their school, the project would in essence provide the services of a *designer in residence* and funds to cover material costs of implementation. In light of the oftenheard pleas concerning a lack of resources, why couldn't we attract applications from more than ten (10) art teachers - actually nine (9) teachers as one imaginative spirit submitted two (2) applications for different projects just to increase her chances of being supported - it worked! Frankly, I'm left in some bewilderment at what is a less than % participation. I have to conclude that many teachers considered such a project just too much effort for them to be involved. If that is indeed so, it suggests that reform efforts with teachers is indeed a very long journey.

At the beginning of the fall semester 1998, we distributed to all 45 art teachers an announcement of the project together with six (6) designers' biographies and a brief description of a design project they would like to pursue with a specific grade level of students. Teachers were invited to write and let us know which of the projects most interested them - why? - and how they might make it work in their particular school. These letters were then given to the designer who made the final selection of which teacher they would work with.

While we are obviously extremely disappointed by the apparent lack of teacher interest in this project, those teachers and perhaps more importantly their students benefited a great deal from working with a professional designer on design projects which had *real-life* applications. *Copies of the designers' sheets and the responses they received from the art teachers are included in the appendices of this report.* The projects were as follows.

- Kurt Van Dexter, a landscape designer, collaborated with Manette Jungels and her students at Feinstein High School to develop conceptual models for a community garden.
- Sarah Sharpe, a graphic designer, collaborated with Trish Adams and students at Flynn Elementary School to design a signage system for the exterior and interior of the school.
- Amy Leidtke, an industrial designer, collaborated with Linda Coulombe and Carl G. Lauro Elementary students to design and create working clocks.
- Stephen Oliver, a furniture designer, worked with Susan Garland and her Oliver Hazard Perry Middle School students to design chairs.
- Barbara Macaulay and Bob Hogan, architects, collaborated with Valerie Kline and Hope High School students to draw up conceptual plans to enliven the school's interior and exterior spaces with light.
- Liesel Fenner, a landscape architect, worked by Katherina Schroeter at Carl G. Lauro Elementary School, creating a bulb garden at the new Providence Childrens Museum and a *painted pots* garden for their school classroom.

These projects provide us with many "lessons learned." The professional designers each had underestimated how *restrictive* the environment of schools can be for projects which necessarily take time. Some were taken aback by the general *behaviors* of students. Several spoke of the *bleakness* of the actual teaching and learning environment and perhaps most significantly, a majority were very surprised by the lack of *imagination* shown by the teachers.

It had been our intention that the teachers would drive the projects when the designer was not in residence, but in reality in nearly all cases the teachers appeared content to let the designer carry the burden of instruction. I make mention of these things, not to be overly critical of the teachers, but because such observations provide us with an invaluable *reality check*. Those of us concerned with the transformation of schools need to experience these things first hand, but having done so we need to be able to figure out what to do!