

Meredith Larson

Expanding Civics in Oregon Reflection

On a typical Wednesday morning in late May, my Street Law class presented their Project Citizen portfolio in a simulated public hearing. Their goal was to persuade Barlow High School to distribute an anti-drug parental awareness pamphlet to all students' families. Their audience consisted of our school district's assistant superintendent, the principal, an assistant principal, the counseling department chair, the school social worker, the school resource officer, and a campus monitor. It was a great panel and the students most certainly had their ear.

This had been a tough school year at Barlow and after losing a student from a drug overdose questions were being asked by teens and adults alike. Project Citizen seemed like a perfect way for those questions to be asked appropriately, investigated thoroughly, and acted upon responsibly. Before I began using the curriculum, I made sure that a unit on drugs and society would not be too painful for those students who were still mourning the loss of their friend. I was told that this would be a good thing for them and they encouraged me to proceed.

Project Citizen became our drugs and society unit. While I did introduce the idea of drug abuse with a historical account of middle-class white female opium addicts from the turn of the century, after that it was all student generated. In Attachment A, there are the two initial worksheets. Most telling to me was the laundry list of drugs that the students had been exposed to at Barlow. Knowing that class consensus was important to move forward, the students went to interview members of the community in order to decide whether or not drugs were a problem at Barlow. Examples of this research can be found in Attachment D. The information gained from those interviews was a resounding affirmation of the problem. Nevertheless, a number of students adamantly opposed including marijuana use and they decided to focus on prescription drugs.

The next round of research was not my students' strong suit. Evidence is included in Attachment E. While their life experience with drugs was substantial (in unofficial class polls 30% had come to school on a substance and 40% had tried

prescription drugs), they were not the most academic of classes. In retrospect, I appreciate their candor and experience greatly. A class full of honors students could have researched the issue of prescription drug use by teens in a very thorough, yet disinterested and sterile, way. Many of my students were just out of the trenches. Some, sadly, are still in there. Their research was extensive enough to help the class determine a public policy proposal that they felt would help reduce the use of drug use by students.

As the class discussed student drug use, its sources, and its solutions, they came to see the pivotal role parents play. The consensus was that denial and disinterest by parents can lead to increased drug abuse by teens. One of my students had created a parental awareness pamphlet to educate parents on how to keep their children drug free. This can be seen in Attachment G5. He had done it as his Senior Project, but I would guess it was also part of his parole as a former drug dealer. Since my student had already created the pamphlet, the class rallied behind the idea of the school distributing it to more families. My students had determined a public policy proposal without investigating alternative policies, however. This actually gave the students a certain freedom that I really appreciated—they could ask relevant questions about other potential solutions and create dialogue about those issues. The key to this whole project had been drawing attention to the problem of drugs at Barlow. Two groups were now able to ask tough questions and prod students and staff to think hard about what we could all do differently! The alternative policy groups investigated school policies with regards to student drug use. While the class did not try to “sell” their proposals as our main one, the panel at their presentation most certainly paid keen attention to their questions and conclusions.

After we had determined each group’s direction it was time to put the presentation together. I had students brainstorm what they wanted to do and how they wanted to accomplish their goals. These can be seen in Attachment F. As stated above, research was not the class strong suit and I abandoned the idea of a document binder. The bulk of the students’ message was presented in the simulated public hearing and each portfolio group had a section (Attachment G). The crux of the public policy proposal came down to “swapping out” the school district’s parental awareness pamphlet for the one my student had created. The students felt that the district’s pamphlet did not offer parents much help besides statistics, while the student’s sheet was very helpful. They are

Attachments G5 and G6. I agree with the students—a parent in need would gain many more insights and much more support from the student-generated pamphlet.

The final element of the simulated public hearing was a time for questions and answers. The student presenters and staff on the panel had an in-depth conversation that left me wishing I had reserved more time for it. Staff responses were very favorable (Attachment G7). They felt the students were sincere and respectful and there was a sense that the students wanted to work with adults as a productive team. Students shared from their personal experiences and heartbreak as a result of drugs. I was very proud of the students and their work.

I bought students Costco muffins and Capri Sun as a reward. They graciously accepted the snack and the next class was spent watching a show on forensics. After I congratulated them on their work and we shared a bit, a quiet student raised his hand. He asked me what we were going to do now and how we would follow up. The class created a To-Do list and I agreed to help lobby the administration. I was pleased to see that students had truly invested themselves in this project. The parental awareness pamphlet will be added to the school website. I am optimistic that it will be included in either a grade report or registration materials this summer. All in all, it was a fantastic experience for the class. They felt empowered as citizens and gained a greater understanding of their potential to impact government in positive ways. My hope is that they will take this experience with them as a pivotal event in their civic lives. My other hope is that the parental awareness pamphlet will be distributed and will help parents be a first line of defense against student drug use.