



A class of young economists? It's entirely possible as laissez-faire becomes a common classroom term.

Business acumen for the youngsters is goal of program

By MICHAEL MATUSZEWSKI

Your son or daughter may grow up to be another John Kenneth Galbraith, John Maynard Keynes, Milton Friedman or Adam Smith.

The goal of all of these men—to make sense of their society's economy—is the focus of "mini-society," an educational concept which is coming to Michigan but has been in operation in California since 1972.

The program will be implemented this year in 16 southeastern Michigan school districts, including Bloomfield Hills, Farmington and Wayne-Westland.

Marilyn Kourilsky, originator of the learning approach, said the children "create a society" in their classroom which—at least for 45 minutes each day—"is more real for them than the U.S. society."

Ms. Kourilsky, a professor of economic education at the University of California at Los Angeles, with the help of the Business and Education Alliance and Detroit Edison, is training 35 teachers to get the program going in their classrooms.

She added that in the future the best mini-society teachers will be given additional training to help train other Michigan teachers.

The mini-society "helps children make better decisions by having them bear the consequences of those decisions," she said. The children create autonomous "states" which are "perfect examples of the self-regulating world of commerce," she said.

These states bear strange names—the Land of Knowledge, Economyville and Poochville. The citizens, all under the age of 12, play strange games—"Did Raggedy Ann Make a Profit or a Loss?" and "Scarcity." They also set up fully-functioning governments, complete with currency, treasury and civil service, and business establishments which are run solely on the profit motive.

The children are learning the ins and outs of laissez-faire economics along with "readin', ritin', and 'rithmet'"

Ms. Kourilsky said she had gotten one inquiry from a parent who did not know her child was taking part in the mini-society program. The eight-year-old had come home upset, but wouldn't say why. Later in the evening, the parents were at last able to pry out the reason for his sulking: "I went bankrupt today, and it wasn't the first time."

THE MINI-SOCIETY is an unusual concept. Try imagining the unquestioned rules of modern economic theory being taught at the fourth-grade level. Try to imagine explaining the principles of money and banking and the law of supply and demand to 10-, 11- and 12-year-olds.

In the mini-society, the children set up fully-functioning societies, which operate in accord with the classic economic theories, without actually knowing what the theories are.

Ms. Kourilsky said there is an acute need for an earlier introduction into economics. By the time most people are dropped into introductory courses in high school, she said, "it's too late to reach them." But she added that

the program is also designed to help teach the basics in analyzing costs and the accompanying advantages and limitations. It will also help the children to participate in community decisions later in life and will teach them that in real life, trade-offs have to be made.

IN IMPLEMENTING THE mini-society, the foundations of the society must first be laid. It includes introducing currency and setting up business and governmental institutions essential for the operation of that economy. Later, social conflict involving scarcity of goods is introduced. According to Ms. Kourilsky, this is done by limiting the goods which children typically want. "Resolving scarcity—that's economics in action," she said.

She said the mini-society will progress from the first-come-first-served stage to the modern currency-based economy. It is all done without participation of the teachers.

Teachers are advised to explain economic principles only after the children have experienced a particular phenomenon.

In some instances the mini-societies become fairly complex. Ms. Kourilsky said. She told of one girl who tried to compete successfully with an established "bank" by undercutting its interest rates.

"This girl was paying six per cent interest on deposits and was charging only five per cent interest on loans. It wasn't long before the others caught on that they could take out loans and make deposits with the same money and make a one per cent profit. It took this banker three weeks to go bankrupt, but she never made another pricing mistake again."

At one school, she said, the children had just discovered that they could reduce demand by raising the price or meet the demand by increasing supplies. They wanted to write Congress to say they had found a way of solving the energy crisis.

In another mini-society, the children ran up against the problem of sex discrimination. The squabble raged over the "equal pay for equal work" issue.

"You heard every argument from every point of view. There was everything you'd expect to hear in Congress," Ms. Kourilsky said.

"By the time you take out the nomenclature, these kids in the fourth, fifth and sixth grades are functioning like sophomores in high school, at least in economics," she said.

But the goals are more extensive than the teaching of "easy-made-hard, common sense" economics, she said. "We also want to help them enjoy school more, to enjoy learning more and to help give them a clear and accurate picture of the society in which they are living."

She added they are trying to identify creative, entrepreneurial talent as early as possible.

"Ninety-five per cent of the children we talked to aspire to jobs where they're working for someone else," Ms. Kourilsky said. "Yet 25 per cent of children in kindergarten have entrepreneurial talent. What happens to them?" she asked.

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