

Central House Youth Media Project: Assessment

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Problem

Youth in low income, high risk neighborhoods often lack the parental support necessary to develop into competent, well functioning adults. Confronted with understaffed and poorly funded schools, a dearth of positive adult role models, low expectations, limited access to positive cultural and learning experiences, and little opportunity to develop marketable skills, these at-risk youth often lose faith in their futures and engage in dangerous and self-destructive activities. Feeling trapped by circumstance, and yet heavily influenced by messages in the media, youth often make fateful choices that impact the trajectory of their lives.

Program

The Central House Youth Media Project (CHYMP) was designed to enhance the social and academic skills of at risk youth through media literacy, education and production. CHYMP offered students the opportunity to develop their skills through a program that was delivered twice a week, during school. The program worked with community partners to provide youth opportunities to learn various aspects of media production and community organizing skills. The curriculum (see Appendix) was centered on principles of self determination, community and civic engagement, and empowerment through creative expression.

School Characteristics

Rainier Beach High School is subjectively a clean, well maintained facility with no obvious physical problems, though it is admittedly an ugly building, when compared to Garfield High, just a few blocks away. The school has none of the stereotypical characteristics of a 'bad' inner-city school: no peeling paint, no metal detectors, no graffiti. This is in contrast to the school a 1998 article in the Seattle Times described: "its most distinguishing physical feature - and you have to look hard to find one - just

might be the hand-railings painted pumpkin orange. And even the paint there is chipped.” Built in 1961, adjacent to public housing, with a history of gangs and poverty, it lacks the prestigious graduates of Garfield H.S.: Quincy Jones, Bruce Lee and Jimi Hendrix, and it lacks a tradition of support by alumni. Until 1998, when it won the State 3A basketball championships, the only reputation it had was for violence and other social problems. Much of this has changed, but according to teachers and the principal, the bad reputation remains.

The students in the halls and other commons areas are quiet (given they are H.S. students) and polite. Because it used to be a performing arts magnet school, it may be perceived by some in the larger population as having advantages that other schools do not have. However, there are a number of underlying problems that affect the students and the ability of the school to provide the quality education needed. The chair of humanities and social studies, Paula Scott, and the school principal, Robert Gary, Jr., provided insights into the background that influences the way the students feel about the school and about themselves.

To begin with, a large number of students are in foster or kinship care arrangements. These students tend to move between households on a regular basis. This movement, and other factors, leads to a very high turnover of students, and general instability in their lives. Technically, the enrollment limit is about 600, but funding is provided for only about 500 and the average enrollment is between 540 and 590. However, in a typical year, the school serves anywhere from 900 to 1200 different students. Because of the lack of stability, teachers spend a great deal of time helping ‘new’ students catch-up with class material and class projects, only to have them switched to yet another school.

This lack of stability has an additional impact on the school that is directly related to the topic of the media project, to be described in the next section. As plans are being finalized for the administration of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), student rosters are developed for each school. Weeks later the test is administered. Students assigned to a particular school, who don’t take the test, are

given a score of zero. Further, those students' grades are computed into the average for the school. With the high turnover, many students assigned to the school do not show up for the testing. This significantly drags down the average for the school. Additionally, youth in unstable living arrangements perform poorly, on average, for obvious reasons, and many of the other youth would be classified as at-risk. Fifty-eight percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

The WASL is used to assess students in grades 4, 7 and 10. Following Federal No Child Left Behind guidelines, the state Department of Education has identified Rainier Beach H.S. as "in need of Improvement, Year 2". Because this is not a Title I school, no school transfer or supplemental service options are required by law. Due to a financial crisis, no supplemental services are provided¹. The freshmen were assessed using the Iowa Tests of Educational Development (ITED). It was determined that as a class, they are at the 23rd percentile in reading, and at the 34th percentile in both math and language arts. These scores are below the 50th percentile, the national average on the ITED.

These factors all combine to affect the public perception of the school and the students, and the students' perceptions of themselves. It also affects the resources that are provided to the school. As noted above, despite all the problems, the school is not designated a Title 1 school. While statewide the average number of students per computer is 6.4, Rainier Beach has a ratio of over 50 students per computer. While 98 percent of Washington classrooms have Internet access, only 5 percent of Rainier Beach classrooms have it. Rainier beach has an *official* graduation rate of 48.5 percent (state average is 65.7 percent). However, the current graduating class of 125 has 45 students (36 percent) going to four-year colleges, another 17 going to two-year colleges, 52 going to technical school and only 11 going directly into the labor force, with no advanced education².

¹ At the time of the site visit, the school nurse, who dispenses medication to students (Ritalin, etc.) had been terminated for budgetary reasons. Also, summer staff have been cut.

² While in the past a number would join the military upon graduation, none are taking that option this year.

To further complicate the integration of transfer students into the school, Rainier Beach has used block scheduling, unlike some other schools in the district. This means that classes spread over an entire year at some schools, are condensed into a single semester at Rainier Beach. With class periods lasting 110 minutes, block scheduling is ideal for many situations, including the media project described below, which requires considerable group work. However, students transferring in during the fall semester may be far behind Rainier Beach students, and vice versa in the spring. Block scheduling also requires students to adapt to a different way of learning, with the need to focus on a single subject for an extended period of time, a skill that is useful after school completion, but which is not taught in primary and middle school.

The media do not help the image problem that Rainier Beach suffers. Despite the academic accomplishments of many of the students, the image of the school, perpetuated by local papers, is based on sports and problems. Typical of five to ten years ago were stories such as:

A Rainier Beach High School student remained in critical condition last night after being shot shortly after a basketball game at Franklin High School on Friday night.

Saturday night it felt good to be a student at Rainier Beach High School. The boys basketball team had won the state title with impressive performances from its stars.

More recently, violence involving students is rare, but news stories perpetuate the violent image, as well as the athletic image. Recently, several articles have covered the athletic success of a recent graduate, Ginnie Powell, an NCAA track champion at USC. Another covered the criminal activity of a former student:

Aristotle Marr, accused of taking part in a June bank robbery that ended in a fatal shootout, turned himself in tonight. Marr, a former Rainier Beach High School honor student and football standout, is charged with six felonies in the botched robbery at a Wells Fargo Bank branch. He could face up to 46 years in prison if convicted.

Thus, Rainier Beach is known for its athletes and criminals, though both groups are a very small percentage of the student population. Non-sport successes never seem to be covered by the media.

Media Project

The media project, supported by a grant from the M.S. Eisenhower Foundation, was conducted in conjunction with two freshman Humanities classes, one honors class (30 students) and one regular class (18 students), both taught by Paula Scott, the chair of Social Studies and Humanities. Ms. Scott is Native American (Cherokee), an exceedingly experienced and dedicated teacher, and an advocate of media awareness. Media awareness was integrated into one, 110 minute block period a week, for each of the two classes for one 15-week semester in the Spring of 2005. In addition to Ms. Scott, two project coordinators, Rice Baker-Yeboah and Faiza Mohammad, provided specialized skills for the class. Both specialists are African American, but Ms. Mohammad is Canadian, and brought a perspective to the project based on that country's integration of media awareness in the school curriculum. All students participated in all aspects of the project, with the exception of a single public media event, in which only the honors class was able to participate. The media awareness material was integrated into one class per week, but all regular class activities were also continued during the semester, the other four days of the week. Thus, the media awareness material represented additional work for the students. This is an important point when considering the students' attitudes toward the class and their academic performance.

The curriculum consisted of four parts, plus a final media project.

- Universal Inter-connectivity and the Power of Self – an introduction to the possibilities that exist within each person
- Introduction to Media Literacy – an introduction to the biases and messages that exist within the highly centralized U.S. media
- Alternative Media – sources for alternative views of current events

- Developing Critical Thinking Skills – using knowledge about media to draw your own conclusions

The curriculum began with a broad outline (see Appendix) and was filled in as the class progressed. The curriculum involved a lot of discussion and self-discovery. The key point was to help the students realize that they had the power to question information and views from the media, find alternative information and views, and draw their own conclusions.

In addition to general material on media awareness, the classes participated in the development of a media awareness campaign on the topic of the WASL, which is of significant interest to the students, as one might conclude from the above description of the school. While the media awareness campaign was supposedly an integral part of the curriculum, it was seen as separate by the students, as explained below.

Assessment

Two separate focus groups were conducted, one with the Honors Humanities class and one with the regular Humanities class. While there was a noticeable difference in the enthusiasm of the two classes, their responses were not actually that different. In considering the differences in the level of enthusiasm, three factors seemed to come into play. First, the Honors class was held in the morning, when the students were fresh, while the regular class was held immediately following lunch. Second, the Honors class attracted the more intellectually talented students. Finally, and most important, it was the Honors class that participated in the media interview that was reported in the papers and on TV. The teacher felt that by participating in the media event, the Honors class felt a greater ownership of the project. It became clear, after beginning the second focus group, that to judge the importance of the project, it is important to separately consider the 'Media Awareness' portion of the class and the 'WASL Project'. Of course the latter was part of the former, but the students seemed to make a distinction between the two.

The first question posed to the students was “How did you feel when you first learned there would be a media literacy piece added to the class work?” Asking for a show of hands, it appeared that the students in the Honors Humanities class were evenly split into three groups: those that liked the idea, those that didn’t like the idea and those who didn’t have an opinion. The regular class had few students who indicated that they initially liked the idea of additional class material. The students in both classes made it clear that initially they weren’t sure what media literacy was, but those that liked the idea were those that were interested in communications, as a field of study.

Following the discussion of their initial expectations, they were asked if, at the beginning of the semester, they knew much about media bias and the way different groups were portrayed in the media. They all admitted that they didn’t, but were clearly proud of their new knowledge and skill. Several suggested that they couldn’t believe how naïve they had been.

When asked if they felt they had more power, now that they understood how to view the popular media, their responses were mixed. They clearly understood that they had new skills, but it wasn’t at all clear that they felt they had more power, because of their increased skills. It’s possible that knowledge does not necessarily lead immediately, or ever, to individual change.

When asked ‘at what point did you begin to like or enjoy the class, the Honors class clearly identified two critical points. The first was when they learned how few companies own all the major media outlets. Of particular interest to the students was the ownership of BET. One student offered the observation that it was the same company that owns CBS and other students began to list other companies owned by this single parent company (Viacom). One young man commented, “Why do white folks own BET?” This led to further discussion regarding centralized ownership. The second critical point was when they saw the movie “Out Foxed”. “That one guy (Bill O’Reilly) kept yelling ‘SHUT UP, SHUT UP’,” several students observed, obviously amused by

the movie. At this point, the Honors class became very animated, pouring out information they had learned.

The students were then asked how they felt about the media. They were fairly evenly divided between one group that didn't think they could trust the media, so were less likely to watch/listen/read, and those who indicated they were going to get alternative views, by watching/listening/reading more than one source. In the Honors class, three students took a more activist view and suggested that they wanted to try and change the law to prevent so few companies from controlling virtually everything. This activist attitude would reappear later, when the students discussed the future.

One clear similarity between the two classes was the feeling regarding the concentration of power in so few hands. However, it was also clear that while the regular class could discuss the general issues, the students in the Honors class had greater facility with specifics. The regular students talked about 'the movie' and 'the company', while the Honors students talked about 'Out Foxed' and 'Viacom'. Regardless of the level of sophistication, the students obviously had learned the basic points presented.

While the students appeared reasonably enthused about the general material in the class, they were extremely excited about the WASL project. It should be made clear that while the WASL project was intended to be part of the general media literacy component of the class, many students seemed to make a distinction between 'the class' and 'the project'. Further, there seemed to be a distinction made between the media literacy material and the regular humanities curriculum. Recall from the discussion above, none of the humanities material was dropped from the class, to make room for the media literacy material.

In the Honors class, the level of enthusiasm clearly jumped, when the discussion turned to the WASL project. One young woman probably summarized their feelings best, when she said, "This is the first time anyone has listened to us." They went on to

describe their feelings about producing something that the larger community felt was important. "We've got politicians listening to us," several students said. "Have you seen our video," another asked. Their teacher explained that unfortunately, only the Honors class could participate in the media event, and therefore the regular class was less enthused about the project, but were still glad to have participated. In fact, both classes participated equally in the research and production of the video. It was only the public release of the material where the regular class was excluded, due to the scheduling of the event.

The students were asked to close their eyes and put their heads down on the desk. Then they were asked to hold up their hand, if they had enjoyed the project. Two did not respond affirmatively. Then they were asked if they thought their work was important. The same two did not respond. Later, the teacher clarified that the two were extremely passive, had only participated enough to get a grade, and were generally negative on many issues.

Next, the students were asked to judge whether the class had benefited them grade-wise. Four different groups were identified during the discussion. A few felt their grades were hurt, because they were still expected to do the regular work of the class, and didn't have time to keep up with their studies. This group made it clear that they felt they had benefited more from the class, than from getting higher grades. The second group identified themselves as procrastinators, who were forced to get their work done, because of the extra work. They felt they had definitely benefited by having the extra work. They admitted that any extra work that they enjoyed, would have had the same effect. The third group were those that didn't see any impact, one way or the other. The final group were those that enjoyed media work in general, and were able to translate their new skills into better grades in other classes, as well as in humanities. They felt that they would have long term benefits from the class, because of their improved skills. Thus, some students had their grades drop, some were unaffected and some saw them increase. The teacher observed that she did not give the students

extra credit for their work. They were expected to do all the work, just as previous sections of humanities were.

The discussion then turned to the future. Three questions formed the basis for the discussion. First, they were asked if they would like to continue their studies of the media, by having media awareness integrated into a sophomore class. Then they were asked if they thought it should be made a regular component of the humanities class, or some social studies class at the freshman level. Finally, they were asked what they thought their next step should be, with regard to the WASL project.

Virtually all agreed that media awareness should be a regular part of the curriculum. However, not all wanted to continue studying it. Slightly more than half of the Honors students wanted to continue, and less than half the regular students wanted to continue. On the other hand, most of the students in both classes wanted to continue working on 'projects'. They weren't sure that much more could be done on the WASL issue, but they wanted to find another topic to work on. As for continuation of the class for freshmen, it was effectively unanimous that the program should stay. The problem was identifying a project topic that would be interesting to all students, and that might generate outside media attention, the way the WASL project had. The students were well aware that the excitement in the class came from the successful completion of the project, and the media attention that it received. Local news stories (see article, p. 16) on the project were the first that the school had received in a long time that were neither crime nor sports related.

The teacher verbalized the problem that would face the class the next year: finding a topic that would generate the same amount of media interest. Anything less would probably be viewed as a failure by students who have already faced too much failure. While she knew the students would enjoy and benefit from the media awareness component of the class, the media project was the part that made the class particularly meaningful.

With the end of the class, came the end of the project. The students had mixed feelings about the next step. A few were hoping that they would continue to be sought out by the media. Such has not been the case. Some hoped that the state legislature would continue to consider revising or eliminating the WASL. While the WASL may be revised, or procedures for administering and using the WASL may be changed, it does not appear that it is likely that the WASL will be dropped, until federal law is changed. This leaves the possibility that a few of the more politically motivated students will protest the WASL by refusing to take it next year. This would again raise media attention, without really harming the student's chances of graduating, since they can retake it the next year. The teachers all admitted that they would have to be very careful about any advice that they gave to the students.

Conclusions

From the perspective of the M.S. Eisenhower Foundation, the question is whether the program can and should be replicated. Several points need to be considered. First, did the students benefit from the class? An analysis of grades from the participating students, and a group that took the humanities class during the fall semester, shows no difference. Further, based on her experience of many years teaching the class, the teacher has subjectively determined that the student's grades did not change in the aggregate. However, there can be little doubt that the individual student's grades were affected by the class in different ways, as previously discussed.

Second, did the students benefit in other ways? The sheer enthusiasm of the two classes suggests that the students benefited from the class, even if it did not help their grades in the short run. Feeling more empowered, should have a positive impact on their lives, if not their immediate grades. Further, they have acquired vital knowledge regarding the media, and how news should be evaluated.

Third, assuming a positive impact from the class, will this impact continue more than a few months? Just as the class is varied in its response to most of the questions, it is no

doubt the case that the longer term impact will be varied. One might assume that at the most basic level, the class will have increased the students' knowledge with respect to media portrayals of minority youth and women. It is not at all certain that this knowledge will be converted to new, positive behaviors, but the potential is there. At the other end of the continuum, one might envision some of the students becoming college communication majors or political activists, because of the class.

Fourth, will replication of the class, in the absence of a truly meaningful project topic, have the same impact on students? All those involved admitted that the WASL topic had special meaning for the students. It is doubtful that such a topic can be replicated, leading to one of two possible outcomes. It may be that because of the media attention, and a high level of expectation, that future classes will be judged to be less successful. Also possible is that the class could settle into a more normal pattern and provide future students with a quality experience, without the high profile media coverage.

Fifth, were the circumstances surrounding the project unique, or can they be easily duplicated? That is, can the success of the project be replicated in other public school classes, or was this a fortuitous situation that will be difficult to replicate. There are several reasons to believe that the experience was unique:

- The teacher and the two specialists were extremely enthusiastic and qualified. Coming from three different cultures, they offered a breadth of experience that would be hard to replicate.
- The block scheduling provided an opportunity for 110 minutes per week of uninterrupted time to work on the WASL project.
- The topic of the project was extremely interesting to the students.
- The composition of the class provided both a good target for the curriculum and enough diversity to allow for alternative views.

The final question is whether or not there is a coherent curriculum that can be repeated, semester after semester with a changing student body or in different settings. Further, one might ask if the curriculum is only appropriate for minority youth, or at-risk youth, or

for those in a generally liberal community. One might think of how all-white classes of at-risk youth in New Hampshire might react, or Hispanic students in Herndon, or all-black classes in the conservative Deep South. Will teachers in these settings replicate the curriculum, or will they change it enough to make it unrecognizable. For that matter, is there actually a curriculum, or merely some general guidelines.

In reality, the teachers admit that long-term replication of the material requires additional planning and is likely to become routine, with little of the excitement of the first time. That said, it does not mean that the class won't be beneficial, merely that it will become a routine part of the regular curriculum, just as it is in all high schools in Canada. While this is probably a good thing, it does not mean that the M.S. Eisenhower Foundation is the best vehicle for spreading the media literacy message to high schools.

The alternative is to remove all or part of the specialized training from the classroom and offer it to at-risk youths in a different setting. This alternative was tried, earlier, and failed for various reasons. It is possible that with the experience of one failure and one success, some middle ground can be found that will provide a small number of youths, in a well structured setting, with a possibly life altering experience.

An ideal target for the next step might be the Quantum programs, particularly those in the final year (Dover, Herndon and Portland) as well as the Quantum cohort in DC. The presentation of Gary Sanford at the recent cross-site training, and the experience of Emmett Folgert both suggest that a media project would be a good way of getting the high school seniors in Quantum involved in a positive activity. The Quantum coordinators agree that they need some sort of structured activity that is attractive to students. The Seattle experience demonstrates how enthused students can be, when the topic is of interest to them. The expertise of Gary Sanford and Emmett Folgert, combined with the experience and enthusiasm of local staff, might provide the Quantum programs with the guidance they need to offer a structured activity for the final year. Additionally, lessons learned from media projects embedded in Quantum this year, will provide the basis for revision and replication in the new Quantum programs. Allowing

the Quantum associates to pick a topic and to produce something that gives them a voice is consistent with the positive approach suggested by Gary Sanford, the work of Emmett Folgert and the findings of this assessment.

APPENDIX

MEDIA LITERACY PROJECT CURRICULUM

Section 1: Universal Inter-connectivity and the Power of Self

Synopsis: The focus of the introductory segment of the program is the spiritual dimension of life. Drawing on examples from nature and science we discuss how everything is in relation to everything else, and how the reality that we create emanates from how we view ourselves, and what we think is possible for our lives. We discuss positive and negative energy, how what we put out is what we get back in return. The primary goal of this portion of the program is to encourage youth to see that the potential for their lives is limited only by what they believe is possible, and that they must love themselves for who they are and forgive themselves for things that they have done wrong in the past.

Section 2: Introduction to Media Literacy

Synopsis: In this second portion, students will be given handouts and worksheets that allow them to be more familiar with the language of media literacy. There will be an introduction to the different forms of media: television, print, radio, and internet. Through a series of exercises and different video clips, students will view very traditional and conventional views of the media.

Viewing List

Footage of:

CNN	BBC
MTV	BET

Project: Class will be divided into groups of 10 where they can discuss the common theme and tone of most news networks and music stations. Through this discussion they will be asked to identify stereotypes and generalizations.

Section 3: Alternative Media

Synopsis: In this third section, students will be introduced to an alternative voices in media and alternative avenues of media. Alternative articles and film will empower them with a broader view of a seemingly narrow subject matter. Which in turn will plant the seed for them to want to look for the whole truth.

Film List

Fahrenheit 9/11
Bhopal
Outfoxed
Al-Jazerra

Section 4: Developing Critical Thinking Skills

Synopsis: Learning critical thinking skills are imperative in media. Students will be given tools to analyze information that they receive. Through questions and exercises. There will be fun exercise whereby the student will role play “Siskel and Roper” in critiquing the news and hot topics of the news.

Project: Students will be divided into groups of two. They will be given one full newspaper article. In this project students will be asked to read and analyze the article. After making notes on their analysis, they will be asked to research for the “full” story. Materials ,such as newspapers and magazines, will be brought into class. Students have two class periods to do the research. Once the research is complete students will be asked to present their subject to the class.

Section 5: WASL Exam

Synopsis: Since the students that we’re working with are in grade nine, they will be first set of students to go through the WASL exam. The WASL is a test that these grade nines have to take until they graduate. If they fail anyone of these test then they must repeat the grade until they pass the exam. This section is about giving them the entire truth about the WASL. We will refer to policies and any media exposure that this topic has had. Through newspaper articles, reviewing policy, and discussions they will have a perfect segway into the final project.

The Final Project: Students will have the option of creating a P.S.A., newspaper articles, or photographs on *How do you feel about the WASL and what will this mean for you.* For those that would like to make a piece of art, that option will be offered. This final project will call for all of the tools that the students developed during the semester. Since this is a topic that hits very close to home for them, this project will allow them to have some say in their own future and be connected to democracy.

Once the final projects are complete and have been presented in class, the class will nominate 8 students to represent them in the legislature.

The Seattle Times

Thursday, June 09, 2005

Students voice WASL opposition

By Linda Shaw

Seattle Times staff reporter

In one of the videos created by Rainier Beach High School freshmen to raise concerns about the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), students hold up signs to a camera. The message: That using the test as a graduation requirement is a bad idea.

"I thought we were the future," says one sign.

"What about students' lives?" asks another.

Others have put time and effort into promoting the WASL, including the state's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. It trained about 170 students this year to promote the value of the standardized test to classmates in many other schools.

But the Rainier Beach students, part of the first class that will have to pass the WASL to graduate, hope to air the opposite view. As part of a media-literacy unit in their honors humanities class, they've produced eight short public-service announcements.

Yesterday they held a news conference in the Seattle school's performing-arts center, and showed the videos publicly last night. They also are talking with KCTS, the Seattle public-broadcasting station, about airing them.

And they didn't waver from their message yesterday, even as reporters peppered them with challenging questions: Why is it bad to feel stress about the test? Couldn't the WASL help motivate students to study harder? Don't students need to keep up with students from other countries?

The students' concern — shared by their teacher, Paula Scott — is that their whole lives can hinge on one test.

"What do you think the kids are going to do if they don't pass the WASL?" wondered Timothy Butler, 15.

Angenette Alexander-Royster, 16, said she worries about the WASL because she often doesn't do well on tests, even though she studies.

This year's freshmen across the state will be the first to be required to pass the WASL to graduate. They'll have five opportunities to take the reading, writing and math parts of the test. If they still don't pass all of those, they can take an "alternative assessment," which is now under development.

WASL backers say it's a way to ensure that all graduates are proficient in subjects key to their future success.

The Rainier Beach project came about when Faiza Baker-Yeboah, who works at Central House, a local nonprofit organization with several youth programs, heard the students talking about a test that was nearly a year away. She asked whether they wanted to do something on the WASL as part of the media-literacy unit she was teaching at Rainier Beach.

The Rainier Beach freshmen took the WASL in the 4th and 7th grades, so they have a good idea what it's like.

They put about two weeks of research into the project and broke into smaller groups to create the public service spots.

One goal of the project was to help students use media to make their voices heard.

Judging from the half-dozen TV, radio and newspaper reporters who showed up for the students' press event yesterday, they've already succeeded.

**CENTRAL HOUSE YOUTH MEDIA PROJECT
LOGIC MODEL**



