

Excellence in our Educational Environments

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Self reliance, initiative, creativity, and risk taking can justifiably be used to describe those who created the U.S. as well as other free societies that exist in our world today. I feel I personally owe a great deal to those who have gone before me to provide the opportunities that I enjoy today. One of these being our educational system. Our educational system in the U.S., as flawed as it is, still has the potential to provide each individual with many of the necessary tools they require to live a happy, successful life. However, as individuals we have become more reliant on others (government, business, etc.) to provide for individual needs such as transportation, health care, and education. Have we also begun to forget that our ultimate success/happiness is actually up to no one else but ourselves? The project this paper describes was designed to recapture the spirit of adventure in learning and most importantly develop the "I can" spirit in our children as well as some adults that may have temporarily misplaced it, while also improving our educational system.

As a group of parents/teachers at our local elementary school (Henderson Elementary in St. Peters, Missouri, part of the Francis Howell School District in St. Charles county, Missouri) we began to ask the question. What can we do to help improve the learning environment of our relatively new school (5 years)? Many individual projects were discussed, but when you looked closely at each they all fit into one or both of two categories. One would be to improve parent/teacher/student relationships, the second to develop a renewed interest or enthusiasm for learning. Millions of dollars invested in buildings and books do less to enlighten our children if learning itself is not fun and interesting. Also, teaching is not merely the responsibility of our teachers, but also the parents and other adults our children come into contact with.

Since our school was new and little to no district money had been spent on landscaping the building, we were left with a multi million dollar facility that appeared sterile and drab. Not a very pleasant place to see or much less a place where our children and teachers were to spend their creative time. This is where we were to develop the builders, sculptors, doctors, and other future shapers of our society. With an exception of less than 1%, everyone felt the appearance of the school should reflect the creativity, imagination and vision of hope that we had for our children. However, few wanted to spend the money required to provide such a place. Therefore, we would not spend any tax money on the project. The only source of funding for the project would come from those individuals, groups, or business who wanted to support the effort.

Our first project was to start developing a shade tree base around the school. The area available for planting covered approximately 14 acres. We could have placed hundreds of trees around the building that housed more than 800 students and 75 staff. However, our first adopt-a-tree program provided 40 shade trees for the front of the school building. Each tree (1 to 2 in. in caliper) was purchased through a local

nursery that provided them at wholesale cost to individuals or groups that would plant them within the school grounds according to the specifications of a shade tree plan that was developed.

This first fall tree planting was a tremendous success. The estimated 100 plus individuals involved in the planting spent an enjoyable Saturday afternoon improving not only the appearance of the school but the relationships between student, teacher, parent, grandparent, etc. The excitement of this enjoyment buzzed through the school community in the following months and a call for another larger project came from a growing number of interested individuals and groups.

Because of this increased interest a larger plan to develop the entire front of the school was formulated though the ideas of everyone who was interested and with the help of professional landscape planners, horticulturists, irrigation specialists, etc. This project was broken into three phases or sections to allow for an orderly implementation of the plan given various levels of support that might develop. The entire project would encompass some 260 plus plantings of bulbs, shrubs, trees, and vines. An adopt-a-plant program was implemented to support the program. This allowed individuals or groups to sponsor plants ranging in cost from \$1.00 to \$75.00. To our surprise every plant was sponsored for the upcoming spring planting. The parent teacher organization then provided the funds to purchase the \$5,000.00 irrigation system that would be required. Companies such as Chemlawn and Monsanto donated the use of equipment and resources to complete the necessary requirements for the project. After receiving final approval to proceed from the school board, a date for the planting was set.

Approximately 300 plus individuals spent a pleasant spring day toiling to move 90 cubic yards of poor soil from selected areas and replacing it with topsoil, installing the plant material as well as an irrigation system, and mulching the area.

This project was an even larger success than the first fall planting. To have been a part of it was a great source of pride for everyone within the school community. The excitement of our increasing group of supporters began to grow and the call for another project soon came.

During the coming months the finishing touches would be placed on a comprehensive forestry plan for the entire facility while the development of ideas and planning for an innovative outdoor study facility would grow. The planning for these projects, as for the earlier ones, were driven by and reflected the interest and thoughts of the entire school community. Parents, teachers, and students from kindergarten through the 6th grade that shared our building were all given an opportunity to present ideas and mold the approach we took.

As we continued to plan we became aware of a grant that was available for tree plantings such as the one we were hoping to complete at our school. The grant was available through the Missouri Department of Natural Resources—Division of Energy. It was known as T.R.E.E. or Trees Renew Energy and the Environment. We prepared an application and submitted it. To our surprise our request for \$16,000.00 was doubled by the review board. They felt that the previous success of our group and the scope of our plan had merit for their effort in teaching the importance of energy efficient landscaping. We were allowed to increase the number of species and number of trees in our original proposal as well as provide funding for another school's planting through our effort.

Funds to provide the required irrigation system for the 850 plus trees that would be planted at Henderson Elementary and approximately 350 at the other school would have to be secured. Both sites would also have to be prepared. In total the final level of support for this tree planting would reach a value of \$100,000.00 to provide the resources required to make this project a success. An informational breakfast was held for community and business leaders. Our group of planners also held and attended other gatherings to present the project. In the months before the planned mass planting, the equipment and materials were donated to ready the sites by companies such as Monsanto, Chemlawn, St. Charles Quarry, St. Charles Sand, etc. Grants from local organizations such as the Henderson Parent Teacher organization and businesses such as Union Electric Company provided the remainder of the resource base.

The planting was planned for the fall of 1990. Over 1000 individuals were expected for the event. To provide an orderly, enjoyable event that resulted in the proper planting of our new forest we would train over 100 volunteers to supervise the proper planting of the trees. Each volunteer would organize their own planting team. To plant a tree you had to preregister with such a group. The group size was limited to the planting of 10 trees or less.

To share our vision of a revitalized school community and celebrate the beginning development of the Henderson Educational Park, we invited the Young Pioneers organization in the Soviet Union to send a group of children to share in the event. They responded with 11 children plus 4 adults that were able to spend 2 weeks with our school. These two weeks were spent developing friendships, sharing information and studying together.

The excitement in preparing for the tree planting event rivalled any holiday. But as a holiday the day of the planting passed quickly. The event itself was executed with great pomp and circumstance while the trees were planted in approximately *an hour and a half*. *All that remains now are the trees that remind us daily of that event and the continued vision of a place where learning and teaching are exciting and enjoyable.* The organization known as the "E" Team (Excellence in Educational Environments) continues to strive to complete the educational park. What we would share with any who would begin a similar project would be this:

1) Look for and use everyone's ideas to add to your project, you will enlist their support as you do and enrich your effort.

2) Do not minimize an objection but work hard to understand and find a solution to the problem, in doing so you will gain the loyalty of those who have raised the issue.

3) Plan great things but plan them carefully, no one wants to be involved with something that is ill planned or mundane.

4) Make sure you start small and build on success, stay within the limitation of your organization but make it stretch to meet a goal, this will bring out the best in everyone

5) Recognize that everyone has their own objectives, make sure you understand these and help them achieve them as you work together on the project.

Of these five items perhaps number 5 is the hardest to explain. When we approached a business or organization for funding or resources we did not first ask them for support but began by trying to learn how we could help them achieve their own goals as a business or organization. For example, Union Electric Company

spends great sums of money in our area trimming trees that are improperly planted under power lines. These plantings are also unsafe. Children can easily come into contact with power lines by climbing such a tree. To meet the needs of our business partner we developed plant identification tags that indicate which tree can safely be planted under utility lines. This met their goal of community education and will ultimately save money and perhaps serious injury or even the life of a child. The tags also contain other information we wanted to present!

People still take time to care for and sometimes plant an additional tree at the Henderson Educational Park. In less than an hour a few people who may have known little of each other before can share in the planting of a tree while they create relationships that help to improve the school community.