



**CAPITALIZING ON *MICROSOCIETY*:  
How Students Profit from Real-World Learning**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Prepared for  
*MICROSOCIETY, INC.*

By

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MICROSOCIETY, Inc., founded in 1991, has developed a unique and ambitious approach to student learning and development. It aims to nurture higher order thinking skills, in large part by making learning intensely relevant and reflective of "real world" experience. It does this through its program that creates miniature societies in which students have potentially great latitude in assuming roles that allow them to make productive and personally fulfilling contributions. For their efforts, students earn Micro Money that enables them to purchase goods produced by other students. The power of the learning derives from the challenges that arise in the student's jobs, and in the experiences that evolve in their societies.

The *MicroSociety* approach, which contains a legislature, judicial system, governmental and social service agencies, and an array of profit-oriented business ventures in schools, is at once both concrete and elusive. Because we live in a society that has these different institutions, we have a notion of what it is about. It is nevertheless hard to imagine how this can work in elementary and middle school settings, typically in one or two-hour blocks that occur several times a week and culminate in the "marketplace" when students buy and sell their wares. Most people need to see the *MicroSociety* program in action to have a sense of how it works and the enthusiasm it can generate.

Research for Action, Inc. (RFA) and Kutzik Associates were engaged by MICROSOCIETY, Inc. to conduct a three-year evaluation of Micro programs in 14 schools across the country. The emphasis in the first years was formative, that is, it was to identify program strengths and weaknesses to improve program practices. Covering the three school years from 1999 through 2002, the evaluation incorporated quantitative and qualitative methodologies including:

- An extensive survey of students' behaviors, perceptions, and attitudes about *MicroSociety*, with questionnaires administered to over 2000 fifth graders in spring 2001, and again in spring 2002.
- Analysis of scores on standardized tests of reading and math.
- Analysis of changes in absenteeism and disciplinary infractions of participating students.
- Focus groups with students, and interviews with principals, coordinators, and teachers at 8 of the 14 *MicroSociety* schools participating in this study.
- Systematic observations of *MicroSociety* program operations at 8 of the 14 participating schools.

The researchers also devised two scales comprised of the student survey questions to measure and then correlated the extent and quality of student involvement in *MicroSociety* program activities - that is, the quality of program implementation - and measures of student outcomes.

This report presents findings primarily from the final year, while drawing upon some of the prior year findings. Apart from the student performance data (test scores, attendance), the findings are based mostly on self-reported student perceptions, as derived from the questionnaire, focus groups, and observations. The reason for this assessment approach is to place students --- their perceptions, activities, and outcomes --- at the center of the research.

The evaluation was designed to address three key questions:

- What is the impact of the *MicroSociety* program on student achievement as measured by standardized tests, and on student engagement as indicated by attendance?
- What is the impact of the *MicroSociety* program on students' sense of empowerment, their attitudes toward school, and its relevance to their futures?
- How much do students apply reading, writing and math skills through their participation in the *MicroSociety* program?

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

By way of context, there is a large body of anecdotes about the effectiveness of the *MicroSociety* program and the enthusiasm that it generates. This evaluation produced a series of findings that buttress the anecdotal evidence.

Over the course of the three years of study, the researchers also uncovered wide variations in the way schools carry out the program, as well as a correlation between the fidelity of the implementation of the *MicroSociety* model in a school and the quality of the results.

Of course, variations in implementation are to be expected in any program, especially a complex one like *MicroSociety*. MICRO SOCIETY took advantage of the data provided by the annual evaluations to respond to implementation issues. By studying the data on teacher and student responses to the program's design and goals, MICRO SOCIETY was able to gain insights into implementation issues and develop refinements in its training and technical assistance approach. As a result, we believe the structure of the *MicroSociety* program now is considerably improved and, one could predict, will lead to even stronger results in future years.

## STUDENT OUTCOMES

*Test Scores:* There was a sizeable and statistically significant increase in student scores on both reading and math tests for fifth graders in six Florida elementary schools, and one-sixth grade in a Florida middle school.

*Attendance/Absenteeism:* There was a sizeable decrease in absenteeism in three of the four Florida schools where comparable data were available for the period 1997-98 to 2001-02. One school had an increase in absenteeism. The average rate across the four schools declined from 10.7 percent in 1997-98 to 8.5 percent in 2000-01. Stated differently, students in these four *MicroSociety* schools showed a 20 percent decrease in absenteeism following implementation of the *MicroSociety* program. Although this reduction in absenteeism is sizeable, it was not statistically significant, primarily due to the small sample of schools.

## STUDENT EXPERIENCES

*Student Satisfaction:* Students overwhelmingly report they like the *MicroSociety* program. Their enthusiasm was evident in every dimension of the evaluation. For example, 88 percent of the respondents to the student survey reported they "look forward to *MicroSociety*," 79 percent

reported that "Micro is one of the best things we do in school," and all 62 students who participated in focus group interviews in the third year of the evaluation spoke positively about the program.

*Central Importance of the Job:* The greatest impact on students comes from their experiences in their jobs, however there are significant variations in the nature, complexity and quality of the jobs within the *MicroSociety* program. The level of involvement and challenge inherent in the job is a major factor in determining student satisfaction and the extent to which students reap the benefits of the program. Leadership, managerial and other positions with greater responsibility generally correlate with greater benefits. Approximately 30 percent of all students said they have jobs with managerial responsibilities. This defines a challenge to the adults in *MicroSociety* schools - principal, coordinator, teachers, etc. - with respect to the priority of structuring more jobs and experiences that challenge the students and to *MICROSOCIETY, Inc.* staff -with respect to providing guidance and training focused on helping school staff develop challenging jobs and experiences.

*Real World Thinking:* Students believe that the *MicroSociety* program prepares them for adulthood, in part because they are learning to apply academic knowledge and skills to jobs that mimic those in the real world and in part because they are learning to carry out new "adult" tasks, such as, time management, problem solving, research and planning. Again, students with high quality jobs (as described above) are more likely to voice these perceptions. In addition, students' perceptions about *MicroSociety* are reinforced when they feel that their parents think highly of this program.

*Applied Literacy and Numeracy Skills:* Significant numbers of students report that they use reading, writing and/or math in carrying out their jobs, and that these academic skills are instrumental to their success on the job. This indicates that students in the *MicroSociety* program recognize the connection between "school learning" and the real world --- an outcome that probably contributes to students' positive attitude toward the program and higher interest in attending school. Student managers are more likely to report that they need to use these skills than students who are not in leadership positions in their ventures.

## SCHOOL STAFF'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE *MICROSOCIETY* PROGRAM

*Student Behavior and Attendance:* Many schools expect the *MicroSociety* program to lead to improved student performance on basic skills (e.g., numeracy and literacy) and implement the program primarily for that purpose. Many other schools that have an overriding concern about student discipline look to the *MicroSociety* program to influence student motivation and to reduce disruptive behaviors in school. Prior year reports presented findings substantiating this expectation, noting, for example, that principals and teachers saw the *Microsociety* program as a motivating tool, that it [makes] kids want to be here", that they are "more likely to put up with things they don't like in order to get Micro." Moreover, teachers, coordinators and principals note that improved attitudes toward school result in improved attendance, decreased disciplinary infractions, increased student assumption of responsibility, stronger work ethics, and tangible displays of increased student engagement in school. Finally, many of the adults attribute these benefits primarily to two elements of the *MicroSociety* program: incorporation of a broad range of incentives and the progressive role of students in developing and enforcing rules. As the attitudes and behavior shift, improvement in academic performance will follow.

*Changes in Faculty Perceptions and Role:* Prior year reports highlighted the changes in faculty attitudes and expectations that occur as a school's *MicroSociety* program matures. In the beginning, the typical teacher mindset, which develops from their formal training and their prior experience (e.g. an emphasis on classroom control, low expectations regarding students' capability for assuming responsibility, and mixed expectations about student performance), runs counter to the *MicroSociety* mindset of shared control, i.e., between school administration and teachers and between teachers and student. As the program takes root in a school and the *MicroSociety* mindset is adopted by administration and teachers, fundamental teacher attitudes, behaviors, and concepts about relationships begin to shift toward belief in students' capacity for problem solving, self control, initiative and development of higher order thinking skills.

## CONCLUSION

This summary of findings is suggestive of the enormous potential of the *MicroSociety* program to promote student motivation to be in school, to become successful in their miniature societies, and learn to deal with the complexities of working within a vibrant and multi-faceted society. The *MicroSociety* program is not a cookie cutter program. It requires dedication and thoughtful work by school staff. Implementing the *MicroSociety* program challenges teachers' assumptions about control, relationships with their students, and the basic teaching-learning process. It requires them to move to a higher, more informed level regarding teacher-student interaction. This research shows that when school staff makes these shifts, students, in turn, move to higher and more complex levels of thinking and action taking on roles that require them to demonstrate maturity and responsibility.

Unlike any other time in the history of American schools, our elementary and secondary educational institutions are under intense pressure to produce high student test scores as the sole measure of their effectiveness. As a consequence, administrators and teachers are increasingly reluctant to adopt programs that do not have a single, prescriptive focus on knowledge and skill building. In this high stakes environment in which administrators lose their jobs and schools are closed when test scores do not increase substantially, the school that chooses the *MicroSociety* program to reform its educational environment takes on the challenge not only of implementing a reform of the entire school program, but also of dedicating itself to a multi-year, complex process.

1 Several schools with no fifth grade substituted sixth graders.

2 We focused on the Florida schools because that state has instituted a single mandatory testing program, enabling cross-school comparisons. We attempted to measure test score changes in the eight other MICROSOCKETY schools in the evaluation, including four in Philadelphia, and three in other states. However, methodological limitations - including gaps in the data such as missing scores, small sample sizes, inconsistent test reporting methods - confounded this analysis and resulted in non-conclusive outcomes.

3 Florida schools record absenteeism as numbers of students absent for 21 days or more in a school year. As with test scores, the other schools in the evaluation had incomplete or inconsistent data on attendance and absenteeism.