

IT TAKES A COMMUNITY

How schools and community-based youth-media programs can work together to engage students and connect to curriculum.

by Karen Zill

Even as media-education courses and requirements make their way into school curricula at all levels, many practitioners find it challenging to implement them due to a lack of training, time, and funds. Community-based programs, however, offer a viable way to teach media literacy, as well as help schools reach their educational objectives. Community-based programs can engage young people and become allies of the local schools by connecting to the curriculum and to high-priority youth concerns. Promising examples around the country point the way to successful school/community collaborations.

The Civics Connection

By examining and documenting community issues, students actively participate in local civics lessons. At Wide Angle Community Media in Baltimore, middle- and high-school students meet in an after-school program called Baltimore Speaks Out, offered in partnership with the Enoch Pratt Free Library, to learn how to make videos about topics of concern to them. According to executive director Gin Ferrara, the students' videos often deal with community issues, such as teen pregnancy or local education disputes.

Media literacy is woven throughout the production process. As students create their videos, they learn about the influence of authorship and audience, along with the effects of camera angles and editing on shaping a message. In keeping with Wide Angle's mission to provide youth with leadership opportunities, students hold an event at the end of the eight-week program, at which they must do an oral presentation as part of showing their work.

- **MAKING THE CONNECTION.** Wide Angle advertises its programs through public libraries and schools, and teachers are invited to attend the screenings of students' work.
- **OUTCOMES.** Students become more self-possessed and confident as a result of the public speaking required by the program. Their video productions make them more aware of civic roles and responsibilities and can satisfy the schools' community-service requirement.

The Arts Connection

Community-based media-production programs can help put the arts back into the curriculum where budget cuts have had a deleterious effect on arts education. In New York City, Duende Pictures—an independent production company—contracts with the public schools to teach media production through Project ARTS (Arts Restoration Throughout the Schools), which provides discretionary funds from the New York City Department of Education for schools to hire third parties as arts educators. Duende's director, Jordi Torrent, and his staff work with principals to plan the schedule and logistics of the classes and meet with teachers to help them incorporate media literacy and production into their subjects.

Before starting production, students spend two or three periods learning media-literacy skills

and doing a camera exercise designed to illustrate point of view. Students also learn media-arts skills such as frame and composition of image, use of background colors, and choice of music. Torrent says the payoff comes when students see their productions on the local cable channel.

- **MAKING THE CONNECTION.** Torrent originally responded to an ad for producers to make videos for the school system and found that the schools also wanted him to work with students. He brought it to the next level by incorporating media literacy. Through a series of fairs sponsored by the school system, vendors such as Duende meet school personnel and form relationships with teachers and principals.
- **OUTCOMES.** Students' self-esteem increases because their ideas and interests are taken seriously in the production process. Students improve their writing, memorization, and teamwork skills. Schools enrich their curricula—without adding to teachers' workloads—and tailor the program to meet the needs of both teachers and students.

Successful Partnerships

How can schools and community programs in media education get connected? Here are some tips from those who have made the connection:

...FOR SCHOOLS:

Check with after-school programs in your community to see if anyone has a media-literacy program. Invite them to do a presentation at your next faculty meeting or at a districtwide meeting of teachers or administrators. Advertise your need for a media-literacy program. Use local want ads, local university placement services, and community newsletters.

...FOR COMMUNITY PROGRAMS:

Find out what schools need. Go to meetings, make presentations, find allies. (Is there a teacher who would love to know how to do production?) Show how media-literacy education supports and enhances the school curriculum. Publicize your program and its results. Send this information to principals, counselors, and district administrators.

...FOR BOTH:

Be persistent. When schools and community programs join forces, everyone benefits!

The Prevention Connection Teacher Training

The Media Empowerment Program—or Mpower—in Newcastle, Colo., began working with youth referred by the juvenile justice system to mitigate activities associated with substance abuse, school failure, and delinquent behavior. Mpower now works with a general student audience at five public high schools in rural north-central Colorado. In addition to examining the relationship between media and use of alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and violence, the yearlong curriculum addresses a wide range of media-literacy topics, such as genre

An important aspect of integrating media literacy into the school curriculum is giving teachers the skills they need to help students analyze and create media. In addition to its program of documentary workshops for at-risk middle- and high-school students, the Educational Video Center (EVC) in New York City offers a range of teacher-development opportunities. Through workshops, seminars, summer media institutes, and in-school consultations, educators receive the

interviews for their documentaries. They learn multiple literacies, including visual, print, and media literacy, and they receive school credit. Schools receive a vital, effective support service for helping at-risk youth stay in school. ■■

“Community-based programs can engage young people and become allies of the local schools by connecting to the curriculum and to high-priority youth concerns.”

deconstruction, media ownership, marketing and advertising, and film language. The class is seamlessly integrated into the schools' offerings, and students enroll for the course as they do for their other classes. Students spend the first half of the year studying media-literacy concepts, then create short films about issues such as stereotypes, body image, and the power of the media.

- **MAKING THE CONNECTION.** According to Alec Raffin, Mpower's executive director, school administrators themselves recognized the power of media literacy as an educational tool, but didn't have the staff to provide it. Through a community/school partnership, Mpower trains teachers who co-facilitate the media-literacy course. Schools contribute only the in-kind cost of staff time, space, and use of equipment.
- **OUTCOMES.** Evaluation shows that most students feel more committed to avoiding future drug use. Students receive academic credit for taking the Mpower course, and several graduates have embarked on career paths in video production and other media-related jobs.

framework to integrate video production, multimedia, and media analysis into the classroom. As part of its partnership with New York City schools, EVC employs certified teachers, who are paid by the school system, as documentary-workshop instructors. The teachers conduct the student classes both in schools and at EVC's facilities. Steve Goodman, EVC's executive director, explains that, in order to learn to produce a documentary, students have to first be critical viewers. Students analyze documentaries and still photos to hone visual skills and learn storytelling techniques while learning to use a camera.

- **MAKING THE CONNECTION.** After being in the business for 21 years, EVC has strong ties to the New York City schools. Because of its target at-risk population, EVC works through school counselors, sending out flyers before the start of the school year and following up with phone calls. Although program funds come from several sources, schools are asked to contribute toward stipends for teacher training.
- **OUTCOMES.** Students gain confidence and become more articulate by conducting



MEDIA BAKERY

Resources

Corporation for National and Community Service

www.nationalservice.org

Information on service-learning programs.

Duende Pictures

www.duendepictures.com

Workshops for New York City schools on video production and media literacy.

Educational Video Center

www.evc.org

Organization teaches documentary video production and media analysis to youth, educators, and community organizers.

Mpower

www.mpowerpeople.org

Media-arts and -literacy classroom instruction and teacher training.

Wide Angle Community Media

www.wideanglemedia.org

Provides youth and communities with media-education workshops, technical training, and public events.