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Date: April 25, 2001

Board Meeting Date:

May 1, 2001

TO: HONORABLE SAN MATEO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

FROM: AUDREY L. COVNER, JD *ac*
COORDINATOR, SAN MATEO COUNTY SERVICE
LEARNING PROJECT

SUBJECT: SAN MATEO COUNTY SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT

BACKGROUND:

Last summer, the Board of Supervisors appropriated funds to establish the San Mateo County Service Learning Project (referred to throughout this report as the "SMCSL Project"). As you will recall, this program has sought to include some of the county's youth in a learning experience that has been incorporated into many of the mainstream public schools. Originally sponsored by San Mateo County Supervisor Rose Jacobs Gibson, this project is also being managed through the San Mateo County Office of Education. Through the mechanism of service-learning, students have been learning about the law and legislative process and were able to work directly with Bay Area legislators in the creation of laws.

I. OVERVIEW OF FIRST YEAR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

While many of these items are reviewed in detail later in this memo, the following is a list of some of the key accomplishments achieved during this first year of operation:

- **Receipt of a grant from Oracle Corporation that supported the purchase of 10 computers for the school site;**
- **Students participated in bi-weekly interactive lectures on the law and legislative process;**
- **Students researched and prepared a legislative newsletter that was distributed to county high schools;**
- **Oracle employee volunteers conducted on-site computer training for the students;**

- **Stanford University student mentors have been meeting and working with the students on a weekly basis to assist in the legislative work;**
- **Congresswoman Anna Eshoo and Supervisor Rose Jacobs Gibson have been on site to talk with the students about their legislative experiences;**
- **Students gained a working knowledge of computer and internet use;**
- **Students took a field trip to Sacramento to see how the legislature works;**
- **Students have made several presentations to elected officials including the County Board of Supervisors and the County Board of education;**
- **A student presented testimony to the Senate Transportation Committee on a bill that she had been working on;**
- **Students researched and prepared materials for legislators on various pending bills; and,**
- **Students met with Sacramento lobbyists to learn about their work.**

II. DETAILED REVIEW OF KEY PROJECTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The SMCSLP began in September, 2000 and has continued throughout this academic year. During this first year, a significant amount of progress has been made by and for the students. Several key areas are described below.

1. *Student Class Sessions*

Class sessions with the East Palo Alto Community School students began in September and have continued straight through the year. The students have been taught through interactive lectures as well as small group work. The concepts of the law and legislative process were introduced and analyzed with students challenged to use critical thinking skills.

During the first semester, the legal concepts covered included:

- the sources of law (federal, state, local)
- who and what legislators are
- how laws are made (courts, elections, legislatures)
- details of how propositions get to the ballot
- details of how laws are made
- the electoral college
- national and local elections

Some of the methods used to teach these concepts have included:

- student creation of a law they would like to see passed;
- debate and analysis of Proposition 21 (youth crime bill);
- review of news articles to see how local issues effect state wide elections;
- conducting a mock legislative hearing

The second semester has been primarily focused on small group work although full class sessions have also been part of the curriculum. The small group work has centered around legislative projects received from Bay Area legislators (as described below).

2. Student Legislative Newsletter

After spending considerable time teaching the students about the legislative process, the students began to work in small groups to create a legislative newsletter. With guidance from staff, the students determined what would be included in the newsletter and where it would be disseminated. The newsletter was completed and distributed to San Mateo County high schools and San Mateo County elected officials. The contents of the newsletter included the following:

- reviews of newly enacted laws impacting youth
- reviews of newly passed ballot initiatives impacting youth
- listings of the local legislators and how to contact them
- a sample letter to a legislator
- a discussion of the electoral college and proposals for change

Through the generous support of Plugged In, an East Palo Alto nonprofit organization dedicated to bridging the digital divide, the students had the benefit of learning about how newsletters are organized and how to create them on the computer. Bobby Baird of Plugged In worked closely with the students on the technical aspects of the newsletter.

3. College Student Mentors

From the outset in developing this program, we had a vision of incorporating college student mentors into this project. The purpose was twofold: (1) to provide direct hands-on guidance to the EPA students as they engage in legislative projects; and (2) to serve as role models for the community school students. To achieve this goal, contacts were made at Stanford University and several undergraduate students have volunteered their time to work in EPA. Two students in particular have stayed the entire year.

The college student mentors have been a great success. They have not only been helpful in guiding the students on their work, they have been able to relate to the EPA students as young people who have continued to pursue their education. Several of the mentors have come from backgrounds not too dissimilar from the EPA students.

4. Computer Grant : Purchase of 10 Computers

Another exciting component of the program has been the receipt of a grant from Oracle Corporation that enabled us to purchase 10 computers for the school. Bringing in computers to the classroom has probably been one of the greatest accomplishments of this program. Throughout this year, students have had training and practice in basic computer and internet knowledge. As part of their work in this program, they have been conducting research through the internet learning invaluable skills. Moreover, while the computers are an essential part of this pilot program, the students use them in all of their other course materials.

5. Legislative Projects & Sacramento Trip

Since February, the students have been working directly with legislators on pending issues and/or bills. One group has been working with Senator Jackie Speier's office on a school bus bill, one group has been working with Assemblyman Joe Simitian's office on a cell phone bill, and two groups have been working on the issue of the digital divide for Congresswoman Ann Eshoo's office. These projects generally require the students to gather information that is necessary to support these bills.

Recently, we took the students to Sacramento to see how the legislature works and to participate in legislative hearings. The first group went on April 17 and their trip included meetings with lobbyists, Senator Speier's staff and a tour of the capital. The highlight of the day, however, was

when one of the students presented testimony with Senator Speier on the bill. It was a wonderful moment of triumph not only for that student, but for all those who were there. The second group went on April 23 and their experiences were similar.

While one of the students was prepared to present testimony on Assemblyman Simitian's bill, unfortunately, the bill did not get called up before we had to leave. However, the students did get the experience of seeing a legislative hearing.

III. CHALLENGES

While this program has been generally successful, there have been some challenges that have surfaced. We have addressed these during regular meetings and continue to work on new solutions.

1. Changing Population of Students

In this school, the student population can change daily. Students may be there one day and gone the next. They may be back in custody, may have run away or may have been dropped. New students are brought in to replace them. Sometimes, students who were gone for a while return later.

The challenge faced by this situation is that new students entering the group have not had the benefit of previous lectures to learn the basics of the legislative process. In addition, when students leave, they may leave a project unfinished that then needs to be completed either by the instructor or another student.

Thus far we have addressed this by doing lots of review (which actually benefits everyone) and through individual attention. We will continue to work on ideas for addressing this issue.

2. Differing Levels of Education & Comprehension

The students in this school all have different backgrounds and different levels of education. This has presented challenges primarily when we do large group lectures. However, for the most part we can address this by speaking at a certain level and providing lots of explanatory language.

CONCLUSION

All in all, this first year seems to have been very successful. Despite our lack of experience working in this venue, the pieces have fallen in place. the students seem engaged and interested, the legislators participating are enthusiastic, the college student mentor program has been very successful, and the students work products have been promising.