

**What's New in Nevada
Schools?
A Case Study: Jacobson
Elementary School**
A Micro-Society in Las Vegas, Nevada

by

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Francie Johnson would like to acknowledge the contribution and support of her entire staff..."without them Jacobsonville would not be the success that it is."

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What's New in Nevada Schools?
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A Micro-Society in Las Vegas, Nevada

"Imagine a place where children learn math by holding jobs, paying taxes and owning businesses that sell everything from pom-pom pencils to potpourri pillows. A place where students study logic and law by taking their peers to court and fining them in the schools own currency. A place where kids come to understand politics by drawing up their own constitution, drafting laws and deciding which days of the week baseball caps may be worn to class. Imagine, in short, a school where civics is not just a course but a continuous experience in playing with the building blocks of a modern society."

TIME MAGAZINE
September 21,1992

Jacobsonville is such a place!

A Nevada Community Seeks Ideas and Solutions

At present, there are an estimated five to ten million youth identified as "at risk" in our country: children at risk of dropping out of school; of using, abusing or selling drugs; of getting pregnant or causing pregnancy; of contracting AIDS or other life-threatening communicable disease; or of living on the edge of homelessness and hopelessness from family strife or disability. These "at risk" considerations are often interdependent and often give rise to each other as a child "matures" both physically and emotionally in the school and social environments. Despite decades of effort by social service and government agencies, an expanding bureaucracy and mandated programs, the overall prognosis for these youth "at risk" are worsening rather than improving. These children are functioning at the margins of society. They have little hope of ever experiencing our mainstream economic and social systems.

Our State of Nevada reflects the worst of the national problem with high school dropout rates that are among the highest in the nation.

Beyond the immediate, personal problems identified as belonging to "at risk" students, business and industry have charged that public schools are not providing suitable basic educational foundation for their employment needs—requiring them to offer remedial programs to meet their minimum requirements for employment.

Francie Johnson, principal of Jacobson Elementary School, sought solutions to the problems of "at risk" decisions and their ultimate impact on mainstream society. She sought advice from her community, and went on to develop a unique program in a predominantly middle class school in Las Vegas which is centered on the principles of entrepreneurship and personal commitment. Her pilot program at Jacobson Elementary School grew to become Nevada's first experience with site-based management and school autonomy.

Unique School Concept Developed in the 1970s

Francie Johnson did not originate the concept of the *Micro-Society* she applies at Jacobson Elementary School. Her genius lies in her courage to implement this novel, objective oriented approach to education. Twenty years ago, George H. Richmond sketched the first blueprint for Micro-Society Schools in his monograph: The Micro-Society School: A Real World in Miniature.

George Richmond was raised in a tenement on Manhattan's Lower East Side, and subsequently earned a degree in Education at Yale University. His first experience in the public school system was a young teacher's nightmare: his students cut classes, scorned homework, and defied discipline. He was totally ineffectual as an educator in the established public school classroom.

Richmond despaired of a system where teachers pretended to teach and students pretended to learn. But his frustration inspired him to seek a solution to the problem: he believed in a child's innate ability to grasp abstract concepts. If children could not be inspired to learn through discipline, willpower, and the force of reason, perhaps re-directing their innate sense of individuality, freedom, and personal achievement would inspire them. He understood the uselessness of conventional grading systems for these difficult students. An "A" could not be bought or bartered and thus had no value to them—they needed a reward system that was more consistent with life as they knew it. Richmond's solution was to develop an educational curriculum that closely reflected real life challenges and solutions, replete with a "currency" instead of a grade.

George Richmond set up a small scale version of this program while working as a public school teacher and administrator in New York City and Hartford, Connecticut, in the early 1970s. It was not until 1981 that his idea was integrated into the curriculum of an entire school. In 1981, several educators from Lowell, Massachusetts asked Mr. Richmond to help them create a Magnet School that would use the resources of their city to reinforce connections between academics and the workforce. Since then, the Lowell school has served as the prototype for others, including Jacobson Elementary School in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Never Too Young: Entrepreneurship Starts in Kindergarten

A basic tenet of the entrepreneurial approach to education is that introducing students to caring adults offers them the opportunity to gain some control over their lives. Building on the youngster's natural strengths and abilities, entrepreneurism offers a positive educational alternative for building society on a foundation of success and independence. Our youth already possess the necessary savvy to understand the principles of the free market. They are "street smart." They already understand risk-taking, mental strength, sales ability, alertness to information and to opportunity.

The entrepreneurial approach generates self-confidence and purpose, enhances positive social skills and boosts overall interest in learning. The economic literacy provided by such programs doesn't just fill jobs ... it encourages youth to generate jobs. *"I've taught economics at the secondary level, and found that it's already too late to teach certain economic principles."* Dr. Marilyn Kourilsy, director of teacher education at the University of California at Los Angeles Graduate School said to THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. *"Kindergarten is the place to start."*

Francie Johnson brought the concept of the Micro-Society school to the suburbs of Las Vegas—formulating an effective curriculum with the help of teachers, parents, business and industry. Bank of America and other large corporations, working in tandem with the University of Nevada Las Vegas' Barbara Schick Center for Economics, sent advisors to Jacobson Elementary School to map out the initial strategies with the entrepreneur team. Attention was focused on two primary areas: establishment of a functioning micro-society based on a free-market economy and a well rounded general curriculum.

Basic Concepts: The Essential Elements of Jacobson Elementary School

An essential foundation of any market-based economy is negotiable currency and a banking system. In 1991, the teachers at Jacobson Elementary invented "*bear bucks*" as a positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior. (The school mascot is a bear; hence, the "bear bucks" economy was born). The notion of "bear bucks" was later fully developed by designating it the currency to be circulated within the developing micro-society. A true level of currency sophistication was reached with the implementation of a 10 to 1 (bear bucks to U.S. dollars) exchange rate—after all, Jacobson students would be doing business outside of the school proper!

Fifth grade students were given class instruction by Bank of America representatives on banking concepts, how a bank operates, basic bookkeeping and how to store records in a computer database. The students went on to select their own bank officers and set up a bank of their own at Jacobson Elementary. In addition to checking and savings accounts, a wide range of services were offered, including small business loans for enterprising citizens who wished to start a business. To ease the students into the system, fourth and fifth graders were the first citizens allowed to open checking and savings accounts.

Funds from outside sources are deposited in the Jacobsonville Bank. Students receive a "paycheck" each pay period from their teacher reflecting their academic assessments and jobs. Students may spend their Bear Bucks on T-shirts, sweatshirts, as well as snack bar items.

Please refer to APPENDIX A, a schematic of "JACOBSONVILLE: A Model Community" for a flow chart of financial activity.

Small Business Start-ups

Money earned by the citizens of Jacobsonville can be invested in the start-up of a small business or in assisting with the operation of existing ones. To start a business, Jacobsonville entrepreneurs must obtain financing and a business license. A business license is obtained from the government (the other essential element of society developed and implemented at Jacobson) which also assesses taxes for government services. All external funding is channeled through the bank which, in turn, repays community funded loans with real currency.

Sav On Drugs, one of the school's community partners, offered to take the lead in establishing retail space on location at Jacobson. A Sav On representative gave instruction on retail management: book keeping, inventory control and marketing. Jacobson students could then opt to become store managers who were responsible for paying overhead, paying salaries, and establishing their profit margins. Sav On Drugs donated all store items initially. Later,

they made an arrangement with Jacobson to provide items at cost plus 10%.

The second business to avail itself of small business loans was Mailboxes Etc., a free-market post office run exclusively by first and second graders. Presently the mail system operates in Jacobsonville from 2-3 pm daily. The mail is picked up and delivered to classroom mailboxes throughout the school. These young entrepreneurs marketed their post office by designing and selling Christmas stamps. When the business began to show a profit, the managers reinvested capital to expand the business into a gift wrapping service.

Once a month, Jacobsonville citizens attend "Kids College," a tuition based community college. Jacobsonville citizens sign up for classes such as: photography, computer lab, and arts and crafts—taught by parent volunteers.

Laboratories in Democracy

Jacobsonville, like most micro-society schools, has a student written constitution, an elected legislature and an elaborate court system. Proponents of the school say their objectives are not just to turn out competent, compliant, corporate workers; they also seek to cultivate the skills students need to become good citizens. Therefore, students serve as judges, prosecutors, defense lawyers, bailiffs and jurors in trials which resolve disputes as serious as stolen lunch money or as minor as playground arguments. In addition, to settling the disputes at hand, the judicial system has become a living experiment in applied moral and ethical development. The students get satisfaction over someone in their peer group "hearing out the issue and following the process through, until justice is served. Often, to the surprise of teachers, the children are stricter disciplinarians than adults. Sentences may be as slight as paying a fine in "bear bucks", to serving time in "jail" or performing community service.

Lessons in Life

The administration and faculty at Jacobson Elementary believe that children should be taught responsible citizenship. Jacobsonville's citizens undertake a different community service project each month. In December of 1992, the students developed the "Child to Child Program"—filling backpacks for needy children in the Las Vegas area.

Financial Backing

It is difficult to predict what the exact cost of this project will be. Ideas are still being implemented, adequate funding is its only limitation. Thus far, financing for the Jacobsonville project has come from several diverse sources, including an Impact Grant, the PTA, and donations from parents whose children attend Jacobson Elementary School.

Parents are encouraged to deposit money in the Jacobsonville bank that they would normally give their children to spend at school. For example, a 50¢ per day snack bar allowance (\$90 per year) can be held on deposit for the year in the child's account. Much of the child's "salary" therefore, comes from parental funding.

It is hoped that a separate building to accommodate future Jacobsonville businesses may be built with funds raised from community sponsors. Jacobsonville earnestly desires that an increasing number of private businesses will become interested and committed to

participate (both practically and financially) so that needed funds and talents will be readily available to its citizens.

Educational Philosophies Split

The concept is catching on, as evidenced by several entrepreneur toolbox-styled films presently available. Through a series of Walt Disney films entitled "Fergi Builds a Business", students are also introduced to concepts such as capital, production, competition, monopoly, and supply and demand. These films portray a group of teens as they create a business, incorporate, and diversify. But films do not gloss over the risks: business failure and bankruptcy are also portrayed.

Although insufficient time has passed to evaluate The Jacobsonville Microsociety, the program is showing promise. Students achievement appears to be experiencing an upward turn. In addition to honing math and analytical skills, the curriculum also sparks imagination.

Critics of the Jacobsonville concept have shown concern that pandering to the mercenary side of achievement is not the goal of traditional education. These critics need only look to other cities and the success they have achieved to realize that the microsociety concept has merit.

City Magnet School, which opened in an empty library in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1981, is a phenomenal success by any standard. By 1987, the school's students were testing two years above the national norm in both reading and math. In 1990, 13 eighth-graders passed first-year college-level exams—again excelling in reading and math. School attendance hovers around 96%, and during the past six years only five children have dropped out. Those numbers were impressive enough to inspire the New York school districts of Yonkers and Newburgh, and the Massachusetts District of Pepperell, to create their own versions of a school microsociety. They achieved similar results.

A Challenge for Nevada

The high school drop-out problem is well documented in our state. We are all to painfully aware of many of our students underachievement and their dissatisfaction with the existing educational structure and curriculum. Does the existing system truly meet the needs of our children? Why are so many turned off and turned out by it? Does it really matter whether a child learns to read, write, and do arithmetic by real-time application studies or in an unruly classroom ... if he really learns the basics?

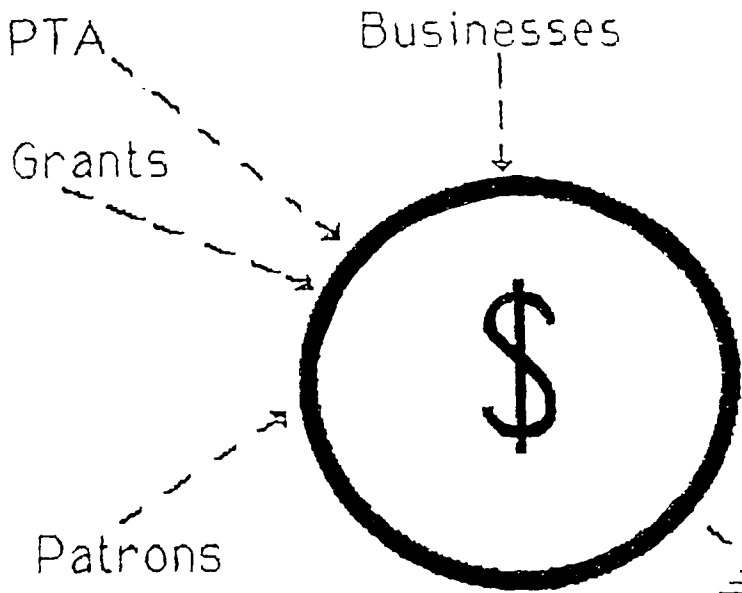
Perhaps it is time for Nevada to reconsider how it meets its responsibility to educate its children to a basic minimal level ... and perhaps, achieve true excellence in education for more of our youth!

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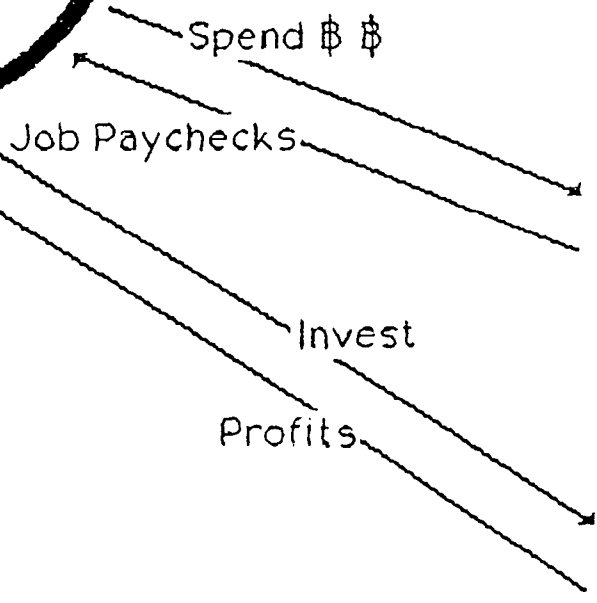
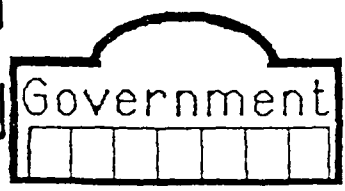
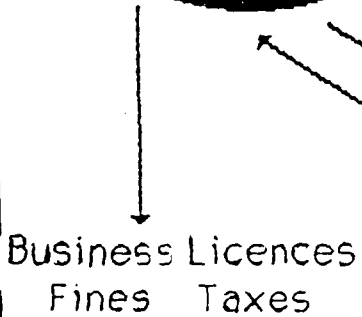
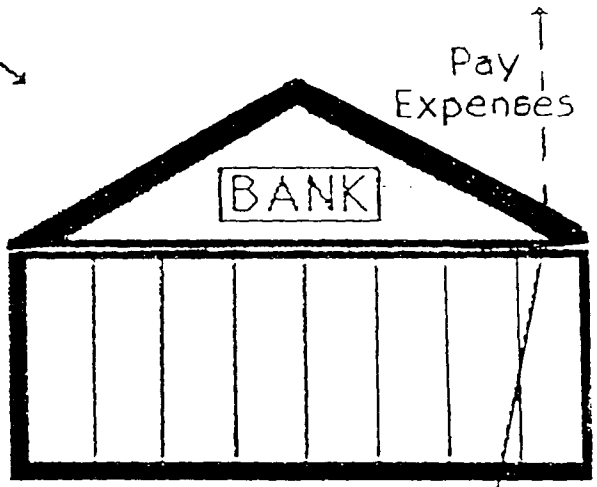
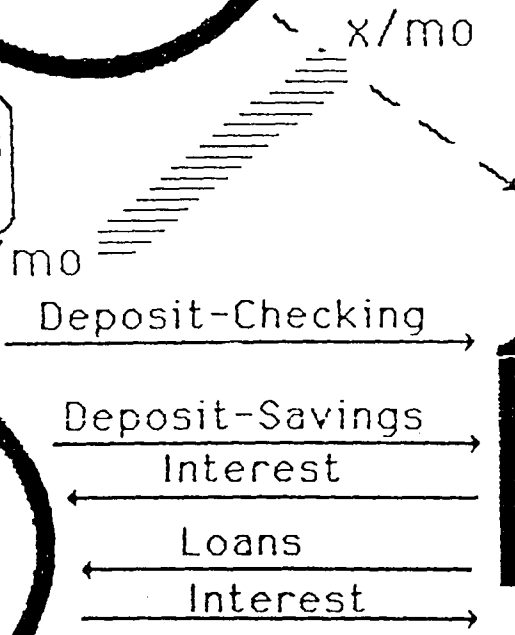
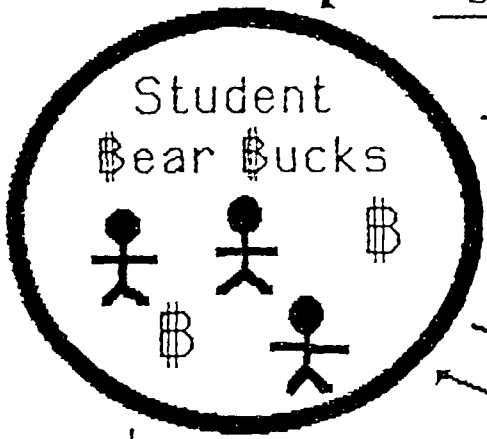
Additions:

- Clark County School District is presently allowing site-based management at several schools within the district. Francie Johnson's program at Jacobson Elementary, however, remains unique.
- Sav On Drugs Store donated all store items initially. Later, they made an arrangement with Jacobson to provide items at cost plus 10%.
- Periodically, students attend Kids College as one of many electives open to students during that time seat.
- Under Laboratories in Democracy, Jacobson has not instituted a jail, per se. Other microsociety models have instituted similar forms of discipline at the urging of their school's "government."

JACOBSONVILLE A Model Community



-----> Res: American Dollars \$\$
 -----> Jacobson Bear Bucks B B
 =====> Exchange Rate



Pay Expenses

An upward-pointing arrow from the Kid-Owned and Operated Businesses box to the BANK building.