

Laconia Middle School students take the lead

By CHRISTINE GINGERELLA
LACONIA SCHOOL DISTRICT

Imagine the results of educational leaders and community members, along with our mayor, gathering with an inclusive group of students to share ideas about their learning.

New Hampshire After School Alliance/Mayoral Summit 2014 on Workforce Development: In preparing for a proposal for the continuation of Project EXTRA with 21st Century Community Learning Center federal funding, an invested group of school and community members met to discuss a five-year focus area and plan. As experienced and invested adults who were more than ready to take on the challenge of how after school activities could impact workforce development, it was noted that an important representative group was missing at the table – our students.

Through numerous meetings using a brainstorming and shared decision-making process, our students voiced the following: “more community involvement; offer programs to prepare for high school, college and real life; internships to begin at middle school level; and increase links to community resources.” With this foundation established in 2016, the Laconia School District’s proposal was granted five more years of funding with an emphasis on the REAL (Relevant Experiences Advancing Learners) Initiative for Laconia Middle School.

Youth voice and engagement didn’t end there. Sixteen middle school students were recommended by their teachers and after-school coordinators to take the lead in ensuring the foundation remained strong and to design an event where all community and



(Photo courtesy of Christine Gingerella from the Office of Extended Learning)

school members were engaged in the 4 Cs of 21st Century Learning: Communication, Critical Thinking, Creativity and Collaboration.

Students invited local and statewide leaders, following up with personal phone calls. Students wrote speeches and bios of key participants. They worked with a caterer within a budget and practiced how they would demonstrate their after-school learning. They created the T-shirts and other promotional materials and met with the operations manager of the Belknap Mill to discuss the layout to make “The REAL Collaborative” a reality.

The REAL Collaborative happened on April 19, 2018, with 70 participants representing local business owners and professionals, community-based organizations, Laconia Middle School teachers, leaders from the New Hampshire Department of Education and Laconia School District, site coordinators and experts in the field of extended learning. It was a successful gathering that featured a full afternoon of student-led activities. Together, all experienced warm-up games, shared lunch, listened to speeches,

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'My First Day of Work at the Mill' is an experiential history program for fourth-graders. Their experience will be highlighted Monday, Jan. 14, at Taylor Community. (Courtesy photo)

Industrial Heritage Program talk at Taylor Community on Jan. 14

LACONIA — There will be a free lecture about the Belknap Mill's Industrial Heritage Program on Monday, Jan. 14, at 2 p.m. in Taylor Community's Woodside Building.

The Belknap Mill has presented the experiential history program for fourth-graders for 22 years. Titled "My First Day of Work at the Mill," it was designed by educators and is supported by many volunteers. More than 1,200 fourth-grade students take part

each spring.

The program actively engages students in developing teamwork and problem-solving skills, as they take on the roles of mill yard workers, from the power house to the knitting room, getting immersing in the historical aspects of mill life during the Industrial Age.

For more information about Taylor Community, visit www.taylorcommunity.org, or call 603-524-5600.

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exchanged ideas on project-based learning, laughed, played a trivia contest about New Hampshire entrepreneurs and celebrated the results of students who were empowered to take the lead.

At our lessons-learned activity after the event, students' reflections humbled me. Comments included: "We need to dress professionally like the adults did so they know we are serious." "We need more time for talking, not just listening to speeches." "When we broke out into workgroups, I found myself shy and didn't know how to share my ideas." As much as my colleagues and I were impressed with the students and their successful coordination of the REAL Collaborative, the students noted more opportunity to grow and expand their learning.

In an Education Week article, "Practice What You Preach, 3 Steps to Elevate Youth Voice," Sooh Rho warns us to "Combat 'adulthood' head-on." She explains that, "Adulthood is the idea that adults always know best. The last time I knew exactly what it's like to be a teenager was...when I was a teenager. Despite this gap in understanding, adults tend to act as deciders and judges of what youth actually want and need. Staff will need support in examining their own adulthood and readiness to learn, as well as to develop tools for being an ally to the young people they serve and work with."

Since the beginning of the school year, students have led the newly nominated sixth-graders in leader-

ship orientation meetings, spent a day at the University of Southern New Hampshire participating in NELMS Student Leadership Conference, presented at the Advisory Board, began planning the 2nd Annual REAL Collaborative 2019, merged with the high school student leadership group in drafting their unified mission and goal of going to Washington, D.C., concluding with discussing their ideas at a special meeting with Mayor Ed Engler. Despite the numerous milestones that our students have accomplished since last April, I need to ask them (as Ms. Rho suggests): "As you look forward to your role as a student leader in 2019, what do you actually need and/or want from us adults?"

Felicity Faller and Draya Rusticelli: "More support and different ways to reach out to our community." Lexi McCrea: "I want more trust, to be trusted to choose new ideas and for people to believe in me." Emma Noyes: "I want bigger responsibility for bigger problems, like how we do safety drills." Sam Mize: "To have more voice in how our community is doing." Ethan Vachon: "I want enough respect to get stuff done and make positive change to the school community."

Just imagine how our students' voice can contribute to our community in 2019!

If you are interested in learning more, supporting and imagining with the Student Leadership Team, contact Christine Gingerella, director of Extended Learning; Aja Montague, LMS site coordinator; Karen Abraham, LHS librarian.