

C L A S S F H

(Children Learning About Social Studies Firsthand)

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The story of "Jack and the Beanstalk" has new meaning for a group of second- and third-graders at Fox Valley Elementary School in Cantril, Iowa. During this past February, March, and April, beans became a means of learning and a medium of exchange as the children "created and developed" the town of Cantril D.C. Unlike Jack's experience, they sold no cows, climbed no beanstalks, and encountered no giants. But, like Jack, they ventured into an unforgettable world where fantasy and fiction were replaced with first-hand experiences.

C L A S S F H, or "The Bean Project" as it came to be known, was developed by Debra Coffee and Rachel McVey to teach their second- and third-grade students about local government firsthand. The project called for the creation of a town, Cantril D.C., where the "bean" replaced the dollar in the local economy and elected officials and civil service employees needed only a second- or third-grade education.

Students began the project by circulating nominating petitions throughout the classrooms in order to elect a mayor, sheriff, and a city council. Once the elections were conducted the mayor and council members held public meetings to discuss issues affecting the town.

To help students understand their roles as community leaders, Rachel and Debra invited into the classroom a former mayor, a city council member, a city clerk, a local fire fighter, a city maintenance worker, a local librarian, a newspaper reporter, and two local historians. They talked firsthand with the students about jobs in the local community. The Fox Valley School Board also held a meeting in the second-grade classroom which allowed students the

opportunity to witness the school board in action and to observe the types of problems that members had to confront.

Following the election, "residents" of Cantril D. C. started a local newspaper, The Cantril D.C. Register. Student journalists sharpened their writing skills while reporting about special activities and guest presentations in the community. The newspaper also became an important arm of the electoral process. Candidates for office took out personal ads in the paper for which they paid in "beans".

After a short time of operation, the editors of the newspaper discovered that more "beans" could be made by advertising than by sales. As an unexpected result, the students ventured out of their make-believe community into the real local economy and sold ads to local merchants. The response of the business community was very positive. For the teachers, this was one of the many unexpected incidental outcomes of the project.

Each worker in Cantril D.C. earned a weekly wage of "beans" and each was responsible for finding his or her own employment. Some worked for the city. Others had to find employment elsewhere. A student who was a city employee could earn thirty beans each week if he or she were at school the entire week. The city clerk made out the pay checks every Friday and delivered them to the city officials and employees. Beans acquired real value as students purchased supplies such as pens, paper, or treats.

Students also learned that public employment was paid for with tax money. Along with the pay checks for public employees, the city clerk sent out tax and utility notices. Each resident of Cantril D.C. was assessed 26 beans per week as follows:

- 15 beans for taxes
- 5 beans for rent
- 5 beans for water
- 1 bean for electricity.

Each resident was responsible for paying his or her own bill on time. Most of the students were able to pay their bills with the pay check they received, after cashing it at the bank of their choice. One

bank was located at the north end of town (the third-grade classroom), and the second bank was at the south end of town (the second-grade classroom). Each bank kept a full account of all transactions which required rather sophisticated math skills.

The city of Cantril D.C. could assess fines to residents for delinquent behavior. But residents could also earn bonus beans for good behavior. Some enterprising students decided to apply this principle at home as a note from one parent reveals:

"We are very excited about whatever project your class is involved with at this time. Nick came home in a very helpful mood. Before his mother or I had gotten home, he had cleaned the snow from the walk. Then, to surprise us further, he jumped up from supper to wash all the dishes. I was looking for the thermometer to take his temperature and he ran to clean and refill the cat litter box. I was glad to hear about the project because I was beginning to think him ill."

As a culminating activity, the residents of Cantril D.C. took a trip to the Van Buren County Court House in Keosauqua where they toured the courtroom and spoke with the county supervisor and auditor. Their previous experience with city government in Cantril D.C. made the trip interesting and meaningful.

In assessing the value of the project, Fox Valley Community School Superintendent Roger Davies commented:

"The interest and seriousness of the students is very impressive. . .I asked members of the classes a number of questions concerning the voting procedures in Iowa and was amazed at the knowledge of these students. I would say they knew more about the voting procedure than a majority of adult Iowans. . .I feel very strongly that this project has been worthwhile and it indicates to me that children can learn a great deal about government...at a very young age."

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