

Lessons from the Penny Harvest Program

By: Gabriele Johnson

The education system has interested me ever since I sat on a few steering and curriculum committees in high school. The challenges facing the education system come from just about everywhere—the home environment, school environment, the community, state and national politics, and so on. For my first Winter Term at Oberlin, I wanted to examine solutions to education problems. I found an internship in New York City through a Career Services email with a non-profit called Common Cents. Common Cents manages a program called the Penny Harvest in 750 New York City public schools. In the fall, elementary and middle school students collect pennies from neighbors, friends, and family. In the winter, a student roundtable in each school donates the money to charities and service organizations. This year, students collected \$700,000!

So I packed my bags and flew to New York City to see this program at work, and to examine the link between schools and non-profits. The Winter Term office gave me a grant to cover travel and transportation expenses. At my internship, I attended training sessions for the teachers who coach the student roundtables, and I researched the differences between Common Cents and a similar organization working with children.

The teacher's remarks about the program were inspirational. Students commonly thought to be incapable of or disinterested in leadership were actually the most enthusiastic Penny Harvesters. Special education students, young children, and students with poor academic or discipline records are the stars of this program. In a Brooklyn school, a coach recalled that:

“A special ed. student came up with three bags on his own. One day he came with one bag, the next week another bag, and then a third bag the next week. He came up with it through asking neighbors and family. It was so interesting because he was a real quiet kid and not very well liked. After that, he was really popular. I've noticed a sense of pride he has. He feels so much more popular with his school.”

At other schools, kindergarten, first grade, and second grade students continued to bring in handfuls of pennies even after collection was done; at the roundtable, they would vote with alongside fourth and fifth grade students. However, the most inspiring story came from a coach in the Bronx.

“In every school, there is the kid who always wants to be the toughest, who never smiles and everyone moves out of their way. In my school, this person was a girl. I wanted her to work in the Penny Harvest program. We took the Roundtable students to a soup kitchen where we would serve lunches. She came with. I’ve never seen her smile before, but she had a big smile when she was handing out lunches! I snapped a picture of her and said, ‘I’m putting this right up on the bulletin board for the whole school to see.’ And she just smiled back. She’s one of my leaders this year and she’s working so hard. She’s my most motivated student.”

The Penny Harvest taught me two important lessons. First, that no student is incapable of leadership. With only a little positive recognition, students can become leaders in their communities. Second, schools benefit from connecting with non-profits. Non-profit organizations provide free, valuable services to financially strapped schools. The relationship is positive. In five years, when I become a teacher somewhere, I will apply these simple - yet significant- lessons to my teaching philosophy.