

# The Best Job Ever

*Philly kids learn co-op business basics by selling (and eating) healthy snacks*

BY NIKLA LANCKSWEERT

The following statements were made by pre-teens and teenagers from Philadelphia public schools. Be warned—you'll be shocked.

- “What’s a blood orange?”
- “Are chickpeas good for you?”
- “Should we pre-bag the pickles so people are more likely to buy them?”
- “Did we do the inventory right?”
- “Can you help me put this stuff away?”
- “This tastes good. Does it come from around here?”
- “So, we don’t get to keep the money we make but get to choose what we give it to instead?”

Let me translate. What these 10- to 17-year-olds, most of whom are eligible for free lunches in one of the nation’s poorest performing school districts, actually said (though they didn’t realize it) was:

- “I’m curious about food.”
- “Teach me about nutrition.”
- “Let’s consider a marketing strategy.”
- “Have we correctly used math to master a business skill?”
- “Let’s work as a team.”
- “I care about food provenance.”
- “I’m part of a community effort that positively impacts others’ lives.”

You may be even more surprised to learn that what prompted these kids to wrestle with such complex concepts was their participation in a mini-cooperative, known as the Student Marketplace, selling healthy snacks to their peers—an innovative program established by Weavers Way Co-op in northwest Philadelphia that helps feed and educate these children, nets funding for other charities and ensures that the three-location co-op is “walking the talk” on its mission to support the community.

“If we didn’t have Marketplace in the schools, and we weren’t so committed to the other initiatives of Weavers Way Community Programs (WWCP) such as farm education, we would just be a store with fair-trade brands, literature and local products,” said Weavers Way General Manager Glenn Bergmann. “From a cooperative business point of view, having a nonprofit arm that carries out these activities strengthens and helps us deliver on some of our ‘ends.’ It makes very real our commitment to be a positive force for good in the community.”

## At first, an unfriendly co-op

The driving force behind Marketplace being



Student Marketplace group members, ready for business.

established 11 years ago to bring healthy snacks onto the campuses of local high schools was the challenge of how to cope with the daily arrival of the end-of-school crowd in the then-tiny community market. Overwhelmed, the co-op had been restricting the number of children that could enter the store at any one time and seemed to view these young shoppers as a nuisance.

“Not everyone felt welcome in the store,” recalls co-op board member Bob Noble, who is also president of the WWCP, which were spun-off as a separate entity in 2007 as part of the co-op’s strategic plan. “The community programs are just one way in which the co-op accomplishes its mission to serve the needs of its members. They add value to co-op membership. They are more than just ‘doing good.’”

The need is clear. In August of this year, the Schott Foundation for Public Education ranked Philadelphia among the five worst performing school districts in the nation. It reported that only 33 percent of white students in Philadelphia earn

a high school diploma compared to the 78 percent national average. That figure drops to 28 percent for black students. Being able to offer learning opportunities to their students without incurring additional costs is unsurprisingly attractive to these cash-strapped schools, and given the deep concern about childhood obesity, bringing healthy food into the schools is also welcomed.

Marketplace Coordinator Carly Chelder now supports nine area elementary, middle, and high schools, teaching formal and hands-on lessons on the principles behind a co-operative; the basics of running a business—any business—such as making change, selecting product lines and setting prices; helping with the weekly or biweekly sales; and ordering and delivering stock.

In practical terms, behind the scenes, Marketplace is still very much a community endeavor of Weavers Way. Working members of the co-op provide advice on the Marketplace curriculum, handle food deliveries, and set up sales to fill their



Marketplace Coordinator Carly Chelder explains how to order new stock to students of Parkway Northwest School for Peace and Social Justice.



Marketplace working group members sell healthy snacks to their fellow students.

annual co-op work hours quota. The co-op provides the snacks, as well as human resources, IT support, and warehouse space at cost. They collaborate on events, and in the past, Weavers Way has given its members the option when they receive their patronage dividend at the end of the year of either reducing their grocery bill or donating the funds to WWCP. In one year, \$7,000 was raised for the program that way.

### Children learn while eating well

Kitted out in Marketplace green aprons behind a cloth-covered table, the young co-op working members set up their wares in attractive groupings, having learned from Chelder that presentation is important. Fruit is arranged in a basket. Raisins are divided into small grab bags. Sugar-free drinks are placed together. The full product list from which each mini co-op can select the snacks they will sell runs up to 40 items, priced between \$.25 and \$1.25, but Chelder is always on the lookout for more. A typical intake for one such sale last year (2009/10) ranged from \$100 to \$241, but was on average around \$170, resulting in a total turnover by the seven partner schools of \$11,685, of which \$3,204 is cleared profits.

Despite the stresses of working within the confines of kids' budgets and limited resources for the program as a whole, the difficulty of garnering busy and highly distractible children's time and commitment, and the complexity of navigating each school's politics, Chelder is unequivocal in her enthusiasm about the program. "This is the best job ever. I teach them, feed them and help them practice new skills. It is incredible."

And she is not alone in thinking so. Indeed, in

anonymous surveys submitted by last year's cohort of young co-op working members, the children's responses to the question "what did you learn?" revealed that they had actually, for the most part, appreciated the value of what they were doing. The new skills listed ran from managing money, being a salesperson, and learning how to advertise, to being a philanthropist and being patient. And even those who declared that the best part was "skipping class" and getting "free food," Chelder insists were positively affected—after all, they will have bitten into a piece of fruit that day, and the distinction between formal learning in the skipped class and project-based, unconscious learning is precisely the strength of the program.

"The kids learn to be assertive, to make a change, to collaborate. It has been shown to ignite a passion in some children, and we have seen them soar," said Ms. Ethyl McGee, headmistress of Parkway Northwest High School for Peace and Social Justice. "They have no idea that they are picking up skills, but they are; and that, along with the fact that Marketplace gives the students a nutritious snack option, is particularly appreciated here given the lack of a lunch room."

With a third of the profits returned to WWCP to help defray costs of running Marketplace, students across the participating schools last year were left with \$2,136 to donate to worthy causes. At Houston Elementary School, program counselor and teacher Jim Salome reported that the children had in past years given their proceeds to breast cancer research, a local homeless shelter, and an organization providing microloans in developing countries.

"This final part of the year's Marketplace activities can be the most challenging and stretching as

the children discuss things such as 'What do we stand for?' and 'What is important to us?,' said Chelder. "They are being introduced to the concepts of social business and what it means to live in a community and take care of others."

### More schools and students want mini co-ops

Looking ahead, Chelder and the WWCP leadership would like to have sufficient additional funding to be able to hire more staff and professionalize still further in order to be able to set up Marketplace mini co-ops in all schools that are interested. Indeed, this initiative has become so highly regarded that a long waiting list has formed. Given the current focus on stamping out childhood obesity and improving the quality of school food, as well as the wider societal trend towards organic, sustainable and locally grown food production, WWCP's is hopeful that it will be able to garner more support for Marketplace.

In addition, however, they would like to see schools build on what is achieved during Marketplace by incorporating it in classroom teaching to underscore math concepts and discussions about nutrition and food development.

"We would like Marketplace to be part of the curriculum in schools, so that it is truly project-based learning," said Rachel Milenbach, WWCP executive director. "The kids' excitement about it could be leveraged in their lessons to spark additional learning."

Certainly, the students are eager to see the Marketplace mini co-op, with its wholesome snacks, set up shop more regularly on the campus. In the words of Ashley, 17, a senior at Parkway Northwest, "It's a shame the sale is just once a week. I want to be healthy and make good choices, but without an alternative available all the time, it's tempting to go get a burger or pizza slice. I'd prefer an apple though." ■

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