

# “Real World Learning” in a Public High School

BY RON MILLER

The Conservation Leadership Institute is a learning option for students in the Woodstock (Vermont) Union High School. It is a place-based service learning program that engages young people in addressing environmental issues in their community. So far this year, students in the program have learned about transportation and energy problems through hands-on projects such as repairing donated bicycles, helping insulate old homes, and working with local forestry resources.

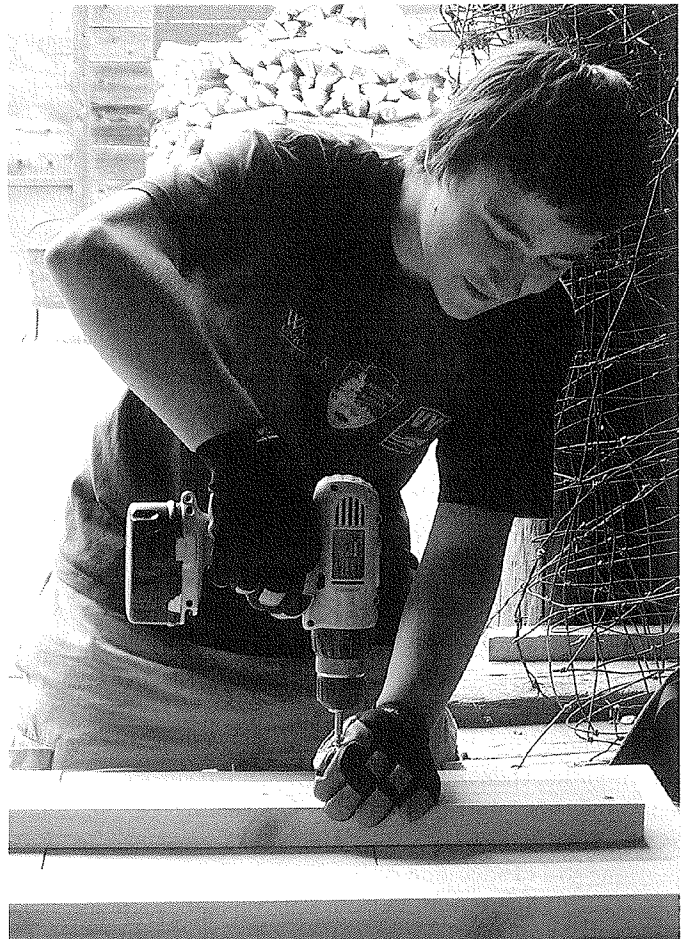
The program appeals to students whose interests and learning styles are not served by seat time in classrooms. “A lot of what you learn in school is pointless,” one of them observed. “Once you’re in the real world, you’re going to see that you won’t find all the answers in a textbook. You learn from hands-on experience.” The students gather in a small group with their teacher, Kat Coons, to discuss thought-provoking readings, reflect on their learning through personal journals, and get busy on their projects. “You’re actually doing something instead of just writing things down on paper,” said another student. He enjoys this approach to learning far more than “sitting in a cramped room just listening to a teacher” and finds it more useful and relevant.

Ms. Coons points out that working as a team, young people interact differently than they do in classroom settings. They are more free to express themselves and respond to each other honestly. Team-building is in fact a deliberate aspect and goal of the program. As a result, she says, these teens are making a positive contribution to the community, and adults in that community have noticed how they “carry themselves” differently.

The Institute is a collaborative venture between the high school, the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps, and the National Park Service, which operates the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park in Woodstock. All three partners contribute to the program budget.

VYCC is a dynamic statewide organization that provides community service internship opportunities for youths, on summer crews and in a growing number of high schools during the academic year. Its programs emphasize team-building and hands-on learning through conservation and restoration projects (for example, they maintain trails, refurbish historical buildings, improve wildlife habitats and manage state parks). Its school programs have reawakened an interest in learning among students who were disenchanted and on the verge of dropping out.

The National Park Service is involved because education is an integral part of its mission. According to Christina Marts, the Assistant Superintendent of Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller park, the NPS can be seen as a network of 400 learning institutes for outdoor education; “We’re very interested in supporting schools getting kids outdoors,” she says. While this can be a challenge in many national parks located in remote wilderness areas, this park’s location in the center of town provides an ideal opportunity for the NPS to partner with local schools. The park has been offering educational programs on its beautiful managed woodlands in collaboration with VYCC since it first opened nine years ago.



The Conservation Leadership Institute in action. Photo by Kat Coons.

Ms. Marts is enthusiastic about the Conservation Leadership Institute because it offers “hands-on, real world learning that ignites students’ interest in learning. They are truly doing projects that make a difference in the world.” She sees the young people gaining confidence to take on challenges outside of school, becoming lifelong learners. Although the Institute (like much of VYCC’s educational work) was originally conceived as an alternative for so-called “at risk” youths, Ms. Marts and others involved with it recognize that an approach like this is relevant to all young people. She believes that this model can be adopted by public schools in any community.

Still, there is a tension between a radically student-centered and community-based learning approach, and the curriculum-centered, standards-based model that policymakers—especially at the federal level—have forced on public education. In Woodstock, the tension shows up in the challenges of scheduling and recruitment. Teachers from the high school are not able to participate because of their inflexible schedules; Kat Coons is employed by VYCC. As something of an outsider, she does not have enough access to the student body to spread the word widely. Currently there are 8 students in the Conservation Leadership Institute, out of a school population of 420. Students in the Institute report that their peers do not



show much interest in, or understanding of, what they are doing. While the school does offer other service learning opportunities, it seems that there is a disparity of emphasis between mandated academic subjects and “real world learning,” reflecting this culture’s dominant definition of education and the purpose of schooling.

Christina Marts suggests that these two sides of education are compatible, that hands on learning is another way of helping students master academic content. The knowledge and skills gained through the Institute do fulfill curriculum standards, and students receive credit for participating. The program is evaluated seriously and the educators strive to adopt best practices. “At the end of the day,” Ms. Marts argues, “you have to prove that good education is happening.” So while students experience the Institute as a welcome relief from conventional academic routines that do not serve them, they are not missing out on “core content.”

In order to bring such innovative programs into public schools in the current political climate, it may indeed be necessary to pay homage to the mandated curriculum and not raise impertinent questions about what counts as “core content.” Nevertheless, leaving the classroom and textbook behind to engage in active, community-serving learning could be the start of a revolution in public education. According to The Center for Place-based Learning and Community Engagement, place-based learning “bucks the trend toward standardized, high-stakes testing of one-size-fits-all knowledge by immersing students in local heritage, regional cultures and landscapes” ([www.promiseofplace.org](http://www.promiseofplace.org)). This embrace of the local community and land is a powerful, if subtle, critique of politically mandated curricula and standards—and especially runs counter to the increasing federal control over schools. It is an organic alternative to an overly abstract conception of what education is about. The Conservation Leadership Institute may serve only a tiny minority of Woodstock’s student population, but anyone who hears those lucky few express their enthusiasm for learning will wonder why this kind of learning experience isn’t available to all young people.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- ① The Conservation Leadership Institute has a blog at <http://school.vycc.org/school/wuhs/>.
- ② More information about the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps is at [www.vycc.org](http://www.vycc.org).
- ③ The Center for Place-based Learning and Community Engagement, a partnership that includes the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, provides extensive resources on place-based learning at [www.promiseofplace.org](http://www.promiseofplace.org).

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