

OPEN INQUIRY

Advocating for a New School

—Brian Schultz

In their crumbling inner-city elementary school, Brian Schultz’s fifth-grade students have become increasingly outraged by the deteriorating conditions of the building. Years ago, the community was promised a brand-new school, but that replacement was never built, and Byrd Academy was left to crumble with kids inside. Brian’s students began to systematically document the issues that obstructed their learning:

- No heat and broken windows, so kids must study with coats and hats on
- No soap, hot water, paper towels, or toilet paper in the washrooms
- No lunchroom, so lunch is served in hallways
- No gym or auditorium, so all school events must use borrowed space.

As momentum grew around this project, Brian saw that it could become the focus of a whole year’s worth of curriculum. “All the subjects in the prescribed curriculum were blended together in a natural way,” he recalls. “Kids’ research took them to books, magazines, and Internet postings that went well beyond their (supposed) reading level and aptitude. As Hennessy said, ‘Before this project, I would never have thought I could read this stuff.’”

Working in small groups, the students created folders documenting each grievance, including photos, written explanations, and data displays, and posted all this content on a website (www.projectcitizen405.com). They composed respectful but pointed letters to school district, city, and state officials. They didn’t hesitate to suggest that these city leaders would never let their own kids go to a school in such sorry shape. As a result, hundreds of letters, phone calls, and emails of support poured in. A wide range of media (local newspapers, TV stations, and National Public Radio) covered the story, Ralph Nader visited and wrote about the school, and the class was invited to the state capitol to testify before the legislature.

Still, in the end, students did not succeed in shaming the district into delivering the long-promised new building. Indeed, a few months later, the superintendent proposed the permanent closing of the building, due to low enrollment. But both the students and their teacher felt that powerful lifelong lessons had been learned. In the words of Malik: “Last year was my best year ever in school . . . instead of it being like school it was more like

family . . . and I learned a lot too, like learning how to write and interview and ask good questions.” In the end, Brian wrote a book about his kids’ remarkable action research project, called *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* (Schultz 2008).