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Final Action Plan Progress Report: Healthy Bodies, Healthy School

While I originally wanted to create a recycling and compost program for my school, I realized that the root of my school’s uncleanliness was its unhealthy food habits. Unhealthy food at my school generates huge amounts of waste because many students dislike the school lunches, so they throw the majority of it away, wasting good food while filling up our trash bins faster. My group at school- the Food, Water, and Environment Department of our Social Justice Enrichment- began by launching a #TBYM (Think Before You Munch) campaign to promote healthy eating and snacking. It involved a PowerPoint describing food deserts and analyzing a food desert in our community- specifically West Oakland. We launched our project during our school’s first Human Rights Week, where we led week-long activities to raise awareness about food injustice, including signing petitions for fairer, more sustainable snacks at school; creating a short (1 minute) presentation booth illustrating grocery store to liquor store ratios in the Bay Area and how much exercise is required to burn off the calorie content of our student population’s favorite snacks; passing out awareness ribbons; educating students about the Youth Food Bill of Rights; bringing a food justice singer to perform at a school-wide assembly; and creating an illustrated billboard to highlight several food justice issues relevant to our school.

However, I have faced many obstacles advocating healthy eating. The most imminent is that many people do not want to change their eating habits, so they are not very receptive of my efforts. It is also very difficult because one of our main contributors to unhealthy snacks, the student store, depends on selling these snacks to raise money for the seniors, and they do not want to switch to healthier products because it would decrease their profits. I have also had challenges working in a group of co-contributors, especially because our group contains several
branches, so it is sometimes difficult to decide which project to focus on. For instance, I was absent from the club for a few meetings because of cross country meets, and when I returned, my water bottle project had been put on hold in favor of a health project. In addition, some of our members get into disagreements occasionally, so I have to act as a mediator, which would never happen if I was working alone. On the other hand, working in a group generates more ideas than working alone, and having more partners means we can advocate through word-of-mouth and social networking more efficiently than if I were alone.

While I still have so many more long-term goals to advance at my school, I have started seeing a few immediate impacts that motivate my group to continue working to improve our school environment. For one, many more students have become more health-conscious— at least when eating in front of me. Many of these students have begun educating themselves about healthy eating and have later come up and taught me new information. Additionally, many teachers have also promised support for current and future projects on which my group is working. The 9th grade history teacher oversees our group and has put us in contact with food justice activists, as well as grants and programs to make our school more sustainable. In addition, the art teacher has discussed helping us make inexpensive T-shirts to fundraise money. I have even seen my family turn to more nutritious, organic food, and we now use reusable bottles.

Throughout my experience with my project, I have learned how to use a variety of methods to educate and appeal to a plethora of people. Whereas before I would mainly have focused on PowerPoints, I have expanded my repertoire to include social media; word-of-mouth advocacy; social justice through literature, such as poetry; and the power of networking, especially because of the potential for powerful connections. I have also learned, retrospectively, how to deal with failure, even though it felt like I may have wasted my time at the moment. Most
notably, I was very excited about the #TBYM campaign, but when it did not take off as strongly as I wanted, I felt so disappointed. I know now that it was a vital first step that raised awareness and helped educate my group, and we picked up many important tips for our next project, so it was definitely worth it. Furthermore, I have applied the different Leadership Styles to help my group work more efficiently. I have learned to rein back some of my western characteristics and focus on finalizing the major picture before nitpicking the fine details. For my other teammates, I have learned how to keep my eastern friend from getting too carried away with the grandeur of her ideas, and I have helped my northern friend keep calm when the rest of the group is off-task.

My Action Plan is far from over. My school is still not the sustainable, clean environment I idealize, but we have a few projects currently in progress. Our current project is reducing our amount of water bottle consumption. In two weeks, we are planning to sell detox water to reduce the amount of students buying sugary beverages and to promote healthier lifestyles. We are hoping to fundraise $155 to purchase 250 reusable water bottles, which we hope to sell to the student population. During lunch, we will hold a booth where students can decorate their bottles or have student artists do so for a small fee. As for our school lunches, I am currently working as a Teacher Aide, where I am researching and writing up grants for our lunch and weight room. I am hoping to start with a salad bar and later progress to buying two industrial ovens.

As for the future Leadership Institute students, I leave just a few words of advice: 1) Find a teacher, advisor, or another adult to sponsor/support you. 2) Work with a group; your group will generate more ideas than you individually. Finally, 3) Be persistent. Your community may not be receptive; the project may seem too hard, etc. Any number of factors could stop you. Do not let them. Trust me, nothing feels better than seeing your community change for the better.