Epstein Hillel School

COHORT 5

Sarah Boland, Teacher

Oftentimes, both adults and youth come across situations in their communities in which they want to see change happen, but they don't know what to do. The common refrain is often, "What can I even do?" or "There's nothing I can do to change that." One goal I had this year was to change that refrain. I wanted students to feel empowered to make changes and to have an understanding of the process of how to go about making change happen.

In my school, students in grades five through eight participate in an elective block one time a week; they are given the choice of four elective classes, and the classes change every trimester. In the fall, I ran an elective titled "Civic Engagement", and eight students chose to participate. We began our first session by defining the term civic engagement, discussing how it is the responsibility of each member in a community to help better the community by identifying and addressing issues of public concern. Once students had a better understanding of the importance of the work they were about to do, they were ready to get down to business! Students were then asked to think about an area in which they felt passionate, and from there, we were able to pinpoint areas in which the students were to focus and identify goals. In designing their goals, I guided the students to write SMART goals, meaning goals that were specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound. Student goals included bringing a WNBA team to Boston, cleaning up of the local rail trail, and bringing awareness to town officials of not having sports games on Jewish holidays. As students worked toward their goals, they documented their progress and next steps in an action plan organizer.

At the end of the trimester, not all goals had been reached, which we discussed as a likely outcome, but progress had been made: petitions had been created, trail cleanups had taken place, emails had been written, newspaper articles had been published, and awareness had been raised about issues that mattered to these students. I asked the students to complete a reflection about their experience in the Civic Engagement elective. All of the students felt positively that they had made progress toward their goals, half of the students reported continuing to work on their goal beyond the elective class, and almost all of the students said they would join the elective again in the future. With this positive feedback, I was enthusiastic to keep the civic spirit alive, and I am currently running another Civic Engagement elective! I have many returning students from the fall, and several new students have been inspired to join. As the students engage in their projects, they are practicing many skills, including researching, recording, and presenting. Most importantly, they are spreading civic passion and excitement throughout their school and learning communities and educating others to become civically minded.

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Trail Conservation Write Up

Marblehead is an extremely friendly and clean town, and overall one of the best towns in Massachusetts to live in. The Rail Trail is one of the most popular places for walking and biking in Marblehead, but if you look around the Rail Trail, it doesn't seem to appear as clean as the rest of the town. You can find wrappers, plastic and bottles scattered throughout the edges, and the trash is killing off wildlife and forcing them to migrate into different areas, like backyards or fields.

The Rail Trail Conservation Project (RTCP) is an effort to clean up as much trash as possible before the beginning of winter. The Trail Conservation Project is led by three Epstein Hillel students. They believe that littering is really harmful to the planet. One way they hope to stop littering is by putting up signs to show awareness of the penalty if someone does this seemingly harmless act. They hope that through their work, they can change people's minds about littering, and maybe even make them think about picking up trash if they come upon it. They want to share this with everyone so people can think about supporting them in this project and spread more awareness in the town to keep the area as clean as possible.

In conclusion, everyone should do their part to keep the town fully clean. Every species should feel welcome. Keeping wildlife safe adds to the beauty of the area and the community, and it makes the town a better place.