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Program uses journalism to break down barriers

News Literacy Project teaches students ways to distinguish reputable news sources

January 19, 2011 | By Erin Calandriello, Special to the Tribune

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Seventh-grader Alyssia Nunley already was aware of issues affecting her Marquette Park neighborhood, where foreclosures have displaced families and bullets have sprayed the streets. But now she also sees beyond her world to issues such as "don't ask, don't tell" and the DREAM Act.

"I used to only watch the news when I would see violence and kids getting shot in my neighborhood," said Alyssia, 12, a student at Marquette Elementary School. But after participating the past two years in the News Literacy Project at the school, that has changed. "I started watching the news more often and talking about it with my family," she said.

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The national program, founded by former Los Angeles Times investigative reporter Alan Miller, encourages critical thinking and helps middle- and high school students discern credible media sources in the digital age. It also allows students, many who live in underserved neighborhoods, to recognize that a world exists outside their own and shows them they can participate in it, according to the program's organizers.

The News Literacy Project established programs at three schools in New York and two in Maryland, before launching here in 2009 at Marquette. But it has seen the most growth in Chicago, and is on track, this school year, to reach a participation level of 1,200 students at seven Chicago public schools, Chicago program manager Peter Adams said. The other schools are

Chicago Military Academy, Nightingale Elementary School, Reavis Math and Science Specialty Elementary School, Perspectives Charter School, Social Justice High School, and the newest edition this spring, Northside College Prep High School.

Prior to Marquette instituting the program — which uses experienced journalists to help students "sort fact from fiction" — teachers say, the Southwest Side school struggled with how to expand students' cultural limits and increase their expectations.

"It is amazing how disconnected some students are about what's going on in the world and Chicago. The farthest some of these students go outside of their neighborhood is Ford City mall," at 76th street and Cicero Avenue, said teacher Courtney Rogers-Bickerstaff, whose sixth-grade classroom participated in the pilot. "The program expanded their knowledge about what's happening outside of their neighborhoods. It allows students to recognize their potential."

Rogers-Bickerstaff said that, for parents who cannot afford to take their children on cultural trips or activities downtown, the program has become an invaluable tool to navigate the world at large.

Through the News Literacy Project, journalists across the country make presentations in person and via Skype to discuss issues tied into the established curricula, from First Amendment rights to why Facebook has grown as a source of information for young people.

One of those seasoned journalists is Jane Bornemeier, an editor for New York Times radio. She conducted a Skype call with an eighth-grade classroom at Marquette and discussed WikiLeaks, a nonprofit organization that publishes news from anonymous sources and leaks.

"With WikiLeaks, it's just such an interesting source for news. It's the stuff movies are made of, full of mystery and suspense with documents being leaked," said Bornemeier, an experienced News Literacy Project volunteer in the New York region. "When I've done it at New York schools, I've found that students are interested in celebrity news ... domestic violence and shootings. This is what goes on in their lives, so it catches their attention."

"The program gets them to talk about President Obama and issues outside of their circle, it broadens their world a bit," Bornemeier said.

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Adams said students take their newfound journalistic knowledge and apply it to classroom projects including radio broadcasts, news literacy bingo and skits. The program typically lasts from three to five weeks, depending on the curricula.

The News Literacy Project also has a limited capacity to offer the unit as an after-school program for about 2 1/2 hours per week over a three-month period. And it recently partnered with the YOUmedia Center at the Harold Washington Library, where a pilot program began in December and will run through May, Adams said. After the pilot, he said, the project likely will continue

throughout the year.

One measure of the program's success is its impact on families like Alyssia's.

"My mom and I talked about 'don't ask, don't tell' and how people should be able to make their own decisions in the military and it shouldn't matter what your sexual preference is as long as no one gets hurt," Alyssia said. "I started reading the newspaper more and the Internet more. I feel smarter and more associated with what's going on around me."

Classmate Guadalupe Narvaez, 13, echoed similar sentiments.

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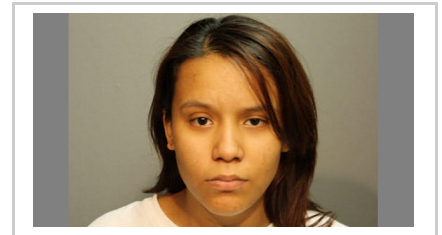
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