Urban Students Create Superheroes to Battle Real-Life Ills

BY COLIN MORRIS

Some lucky urban school children are finding creative ways to address everyday issues facing their neighborhood through a familiar and engaging format—comic books.

Using superheroes created by kids in urban schools, the Comic Book Project, a new initiative at Teachers College, is giving students the chance to speak to other children on common issues of an urban setting. Teachers College has teamed up with Dark Horse Comics and the After-School Corporation, a not-for-profit organization that works towards sustaining after-school programs, to help students produce and publish comics, which they conceive, write and initially draw.

The theme for the books will be "energy conservation and pollution prevention," with help from a "draftsmanship, visual design and motion and plot devices of their own aimed to help develop the students' lives," said Michael Bitz, CC '94, TC '98, senior research assistant and the Comic Book Project founder and director, "and they are very adult themes like gangs and substance abuse."

This year the project has 3,000 students in grades four through eight in New York City and Clevel-and working to develop two separate comic books, which will ultimately be distributed to more than 30,000 students. In New York City, children will focus on "energy conservation and pollution prevention," with help from a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency. In Cleveland, the theme for the books will be "conflict resolution."

Last year, the Comic Book Project was piloted with more than 700 children at 33 after-school programs in New York City. The project was administered by three advocates for after-school education in NYC: the After-School Corporation, the Partnership of After School Education and the Youth Development Institute at the Fund for the City of New York.

The yearlong process of creating the comic books begins with teacher training, during which teachers familiarize themselves with project tools and goals. The first step for the students is writing a manuscript, using a planning tool called the "manuscript starter," developed by Dark Horse Comics.

"We've got to make it interesting enough so that the students are really going to want to do this. It's not just about the kids actually enjoying it, it's about getting kids engaged with the community and the teacher training, during which they're going to learn things that they've never heard before," said Bitz. "The kids actually enjoy it, they're telling the stories, they are really adult themes."

"I think it's a motivating project that helps them express what they're doing," said Bitz. "In kids in inner city schools don't always get the chance to do projects like this."

"They're talking about these issues because they're experiencing them," said Bitz. "And they're talking about them in a way that is very engaging and motivating for them."

This year, the comic books will be used to build on the participation of community residents and University representatives in the planning process, and offered information about different aspects of the Campus Plan, including graphics and presentation materials.

The format gave attendees an opportunity to read the information being developed for the Campus Plan section. On the site, there is an option to send e-mail to the numerous community members, University personnel and consultants who make up the planning team via the "Contact Us" link at the bottom of each page.

For more information or to apply for the project, visit www.applyfortheplan.org.