

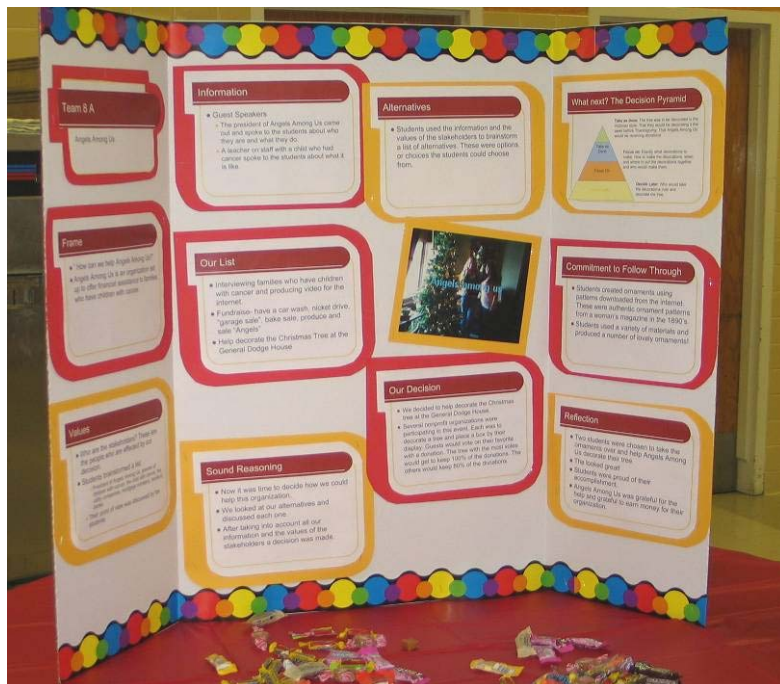


MAGNET MIDDLE SCHOOL HOSTS OPEN HOUSE FEATURING DECISION PROJECTS

Morton Middle School has recently begun a new chapter. As a newly designated magnet school in Omaha, Nebraska, Morton gives its students the chance to practice decision skills in community projects and service learning activities. This decision science focus sets Morton apart from other middle schools in the area. In fact, the program is the first of its kind for a middle school.

In partnership with DEF, Morton launched its focus on decision science in the community, along with pathway partner Benson High School Magnet, in the fall of 2007. Since then, Morton has offered decision classes to all of its students, 5th – 8th grade. The school has three teachers who teach decision science. And all Morton teachers have had training with DEF, enabling them to engage students in decision projects and discussions about good decision making throughout the curriculum.

During the fall of 2008, Morton undertook a set of projects for all students and teachers to apply the magnet concepts. Projects were conducted in teams of about 125 students, with five or so teachers interacting with these students across most of their courses. Teaming makes it easier for teachers get to know their pupils in all subject areas. Separate teams were formed for cooperative arts teachers and math teachers. In preparation for an open house in January 2009, five different teams participated in community decision projects that explicitly applied decision science.

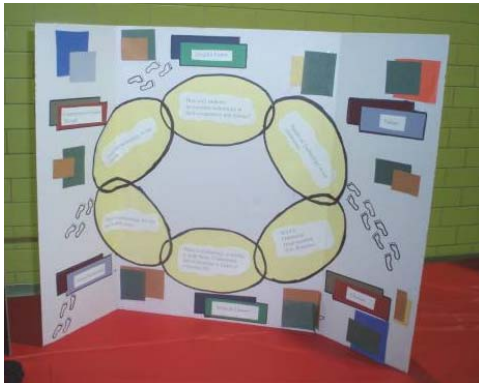


One project was carried out by the 8th graders in Team 8A. With the guidance of magnet coordinator and decision science teacher Lisa Thompson, students defined their frame: **“How can we help Angels Among Us?”**

This nonprofit organization provides financial assistance to families of children with cancer. With their frame set, students gathered some information and identified the values of the stakeholders involved. Next, they came up with a list of alternatives they could pursue, and chose the one that fit best with their resources and the stakeholders' values. They decided to make decorations for a Christmas tree to help the organization raise funds. The tree was part of a display in a Victorian house from the late 19th century. To make their ornaments authentic, students downloaded patterns from 1890's ladies' magazines. In the end, students were pleased with the tree they had helped decorate, and the organization was happy to have the help raising donations.

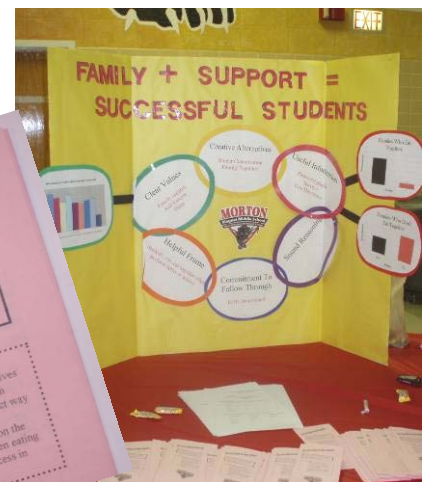
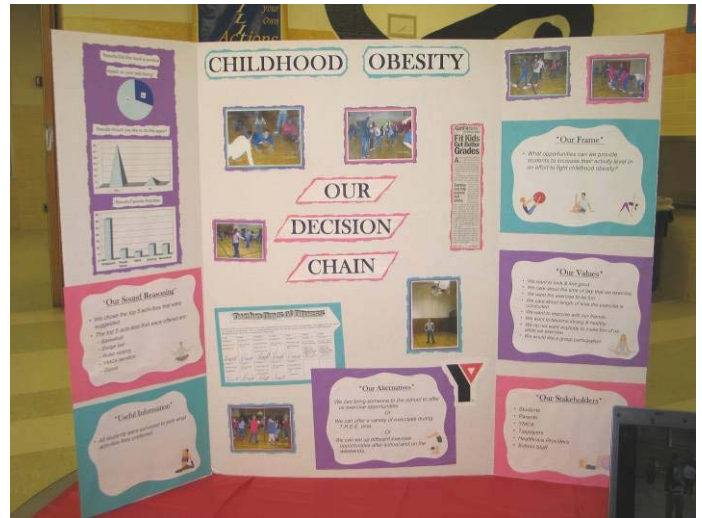
Team 7B chose to tackle a health-related problem. They framed their decision first: **“What opportunities can we provide students to increase their activity level in an effort to fight childhood obesity?”** The team brainstormed a set of values for the decision, listing the various stakeholders involved. Surveys were used to help identify the activities that students would enjoy, and alternative approaches were explored for presenting these activities to the students. The project came together with an offering coordinated with the local YMCA called the Twelve Days of Fitness. During two weeks before the holiday break, students were offered 30 minutes

of activity at the beginning school each day, including aerobics, basketball, dance, weights, dodgeball, and more. Many of the students on the team took part, getting an adult to sign off on each of their days of participation. Weekend activities could be signed off by other adults outside of the school. The outcomes of the project were largely positive. More than 30 students said they would participate in a program like this one again, and about 2/3 of the students surveyed said their wellbeing was positively impacted by the activity.



For the cooperative arts teachers, the community of interest was their students. They used the decision chain to explore **“How do we incorporate technology in the cooperative arts classroom?”**

The math team was interested in factors that affect academic success. Initially, teachers believed that sleep was the most important issue for students. Using surveys and classroom discussions about student success, they discovered that eating dinner as a family was even more important. As a result, they reframed: **“How do we encourage families to eat dinner together?”** For the open house, the team created leaflets about family dinners, including alternatives for dinnertime conversation.



For the 7C team, their project was centered on health for students, their parents, and other community members: **“What do we include in a health fair to improve the health of our community?”** They considered many different stakeholders and their perspectives. Then the students brainstormed a number of different ideas about who they would invite to present at their health fair. With support from the head of the Parent Teacher Organization and through engagement of many parents, the team made their decisions about topics, committed to action, and hosted the health fair, including a broad set of topics ranging from healthy cooking to holistic development, from driving safety to internet safety, and more.

Morton’s January 2009 open house showcased decision projects completed in the fall by large teams of students. In spring 2009, Morton tried a new approach. This time, teachers led projects in their homeroom classes of about 15 students. In these smaller projects, students made decisions about how to help deaf students, work with the elderly, engage with the Children’s Respite Care Center, assist the homeless, aid kids in the hospital, and even support the Jack Russell Terrier Rescue Foundation. Omaha’s newest magnet middle school, with its focus on decision science in the community, is clearly opening up possibilities for its students, for now and for their future.