

Students at Bat

Educational Leadership November 2008, Vol. 66 No. 3 p 9-14 by Thomas R. Guskey and Eric M. Anderman (abridged)

Students can learn to act responsibly by practicing meaningful decision making in school.

Neighborhood baseball games were the highlight of summer days while we were growing up. Each game began with a bicycle trip around the neighborhood to round up equipment and every available player, boys and girls alike. Sharing was essential because not everyone had a ball, bat, or glove.

Games started with the selection of team captains who then picked their teammates. The traditional bat toss between captains and a hand-over-hand climb to the bat's end determined who chose first. Teams were different for every game. We chose our positions, decided the batting order, and established rules. Although we all knew the general rules of the game, we had to decide on a multitude of local rules: Where were the bases? What was a home run? How much of a lead from the base was permitted? Would the younger kids be allowed four strikes instead of three? Issues of fairness governed all these decisions.

When disagreements arose, we resolved them through compromise and consensus. An unresolved dispute might end the game, and nobody wanted that. We all cheered good plays; we laughed at mistakes and then quickly forgot them. An injury brought everyone on both teams together to help. Older kids taught younger ones about batting, fielding, and base running. Most of what we learned about baseball, we learned in those neighborhood games.

Today, few boys or girls take part in neighborhood baseball games. Their experiences with baseball come primarily through leagues that adults have organized. The adults pick the teams and determine the schedules. Adults assign players to positions and arrange the batting order. Adults establish the rules and do all the teaching. When disagreements arise, adults do the arguing. Players watch, wait, and abide by whatever decision the adults make. The players' only responsibility is to show up and play the game. Even kids' attendance is determined largely by the adults who drop them off and then pick them up afterward.

Sadly, for increasing numbers of children, their baseball experience is more restrictive still. They play baseball on a computer that sets all the rules and determines their skill level on the basis of how carefully they time their key press on a remote control...