

Service Learning: Students Making A Difference

*"You must be the change you wish to see in the world."
Mahatma Gandhi*

On a recent Friday NBC Nightly News Making A Difference segment, the following story was reported. A student's dad devised a word game to help his son improve his vocabulary for the SAT test and feed the poor while doing it! The game is simple. On the website www.freerice.com, a vocabulary word is presented and when the player clicks on the correct synonym, 20 grains of rice (paid for by advertisers) goes to feed the poor and hungry in the world. Since the website's inception in October of 2007, 28 billion grains of rice have been donated to the UN World Food Program, enough to feed a million people for a day. And many students have significantly advanced their vocabularies.

Stories in the news of people making a difference touch all of our hearts. According to a recent 20/20 report, Americans are the most generous people on the planet. Not only do we give more of our wealth, but also more of our time and effort to a wide spectrum of worthy causes. The answer to the question of why we give and serve is complex — a product of the economic, social and political environment of each individual. But if we'd like to continue and even grow our giving and serving tradition, the best way is to teach our youth and children to be service-oriented. The challenge is to combine service and learning to benefit both our students and our immediate and broader communities. Service learning is a positive and exciting answer to that challenge.

Service learning is neither an add-on nor a diversion from the curriculum. It is a powerful approach to teaching that provides kids with authentic learning experiences in which they learn academic content in a real-life, real-world context. There are many advantages to this approach:

1. Students love doing it. It engages, inspires and motivates them to learn.
2. It develops the students' communication skills by requiring them to read, write, listen, and speak.
3. In addition to academic content, students learn a range of valuable practical skills including problem solving, organizing, collaborating, project management, research, dealing with setbacks, etc.
4. It develops character virtues and interpersonal habits such as respect, responsibility, empathy, cooperation, citizenship, initiative, and persistence.
5. It empowers students with the realization that they can make a difference.
6. It makes a positive contribution to the community.
7. All students can actively participate and make a meaningful contribution no matter where their talents lie.

To be successful, a service learning project needs to incorporate several critical elements:

- Student ownership. The participants must be active partners in the project, identifying community needs and planning service activities. They should also play active roles in evaluation of the project and its impact on the community. This helps them to develop strong leadership skills and to grow

confident in their decision-making abilities.

- Meet genuine needs that are important to the community being served. They must be partners with other practitioners and avoid making assumptions as to what is best for those being served.

- Be connected to specific learning objectives. Connections to learning objectives can be made either by identifying the specific learning goals and developing a project that meets them, or by identifying the project and then exploring the many ways it can be tied to curriculum learning objectives. The experiential and applied learning deepens student understanding of academic requirements.

- Include reflection. Throughout the project, students need to learn to use critical and creative thinking to make sure that the learning makes sense and has meaning for them. Reflection activities can be used to assess where they are in the learning process and to help them voice concerns, share feelings and evaluate the project.

- Build partnerships between the students and the broader community, including those being served, local businesses, community-based organizations and social service agencies. Collaborating with others bridges cultural and racial gaps and opens paths to new service learning opportunities.

Service learning is a flexible tool, easily adaptable to different age levels, community needs and curricular goals. For a thorough resource, try *The Complete Guide to Service Learning: Proven, Practical Ways to Engage Students in Civic Responsibility, Academic Curriculum, and Social Action* by Cathy Berger Kaye at the following website www.freespirit.com.

Service Learning/Taking Action

Save the Date!

May 22, 2008
8:30 AM—2:45 PM
Melville Hilton

Meeting the Challenge: Success for Special Needs Learners

For more information about
this SETC-sponsored
conference, go to
www.seteachercenter.org

Where do you get ideas for service learning projects? The best place is from your own community. To spark your creativity, here are some useful service learning resources from the March 7, 2008 Teaching and Learning Celebration in NY City.

Action Center www.actioncenter.org The website contains teacher resources and guides, including:

- Focus on World Hunger
www.MercyCorps.org Mercy Corps will be opening a center in Manhattan. The website has curriculum and materials for teachers regarding ending world hunger.
- Fight Global Poverty
www.globalcitizencorps.org has a film library and resources to help students understand and fight poverty all over the world.

Team-Based Service Learning. The League: Curriculum by Learning to Give uses a sports-themed approach in which every school is a team, and every student in the school is a player. The model involves learning and doing throughout the entire school year, and through the student's school career. Lessons and related service topics include exploring concepts of democracy, civil society, citizenship, community, poverty, homelessness, justice, kindness and environmental stewardship. Find out more on these websites.

www.theleague.org
www.learningtogive.org

Animal Action Week. The International Fund for Animal Welfare education initiative offers tools and activities to help young people around the world learn how to become responsible stewards of the earth's living resources. Launched annually during World Animal Day on October 4, IFAW's free multi-media classroom packs are aligned with standards, have a teacher's guide, DVD, poster and tips, and are available in many languages. September,

2008's theme is Beneath the Waves: Protecting Marine Wildlife. For educational kits, please go to www.animalactionweek.org or www.ifaw.org.

Children for Children Grades P-12. Citing research that young people who volunteer just one hour a week are 50% less likely to abuse drugs, alcohol or cigarettes, or engage in destructive behavior, and that service involvement leads to improved academic performance and leadership skills, Children for Children teaches that everyone has something important to give. Find seven service learning projects, youth leadership groups, service events, online resources and grant opportunities (for students as well as teachers).
www.childrenforchildren.org

The Jane Goodall Institute. The Institute (www.janegoodall.org) sponsors a program for students called "Roots and Shoots" (<http://www.rootsandshoots.org>) which seeks to create small communities of students all over the world that want to make a positive change in the environment, help animals or help people. The Roots and Shoots program has spread to 97 countries and every state in the US.

For more ideas, investigate these websites:

<http://www.servicelarning.org> National Service Learning Clearinghouse. America's most comprehensive resource for service learning with projects for elementary, middle and high school students. Look at SLICE, the new database of project ideas.

www.goodcharacter.com/SERVICE/primer-1.html - 11k This website offers tips for project preparation and action, questions and activities for reflection and examples of elementary, middle and high school projects.

www.waterlessons.org Review an interesting science service learning project.

Start Right Now Right Here!

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Our respected colleague, retired Northport teacher Chris Pendergast, himself a victim of ALS (aka Lou Gehrig's disease) founded Ride for Life to raise awareness and funds for ALS research. The yearly patient wheelchair ride from Montauk to Manhattan provides different ways for walkers, volunteers, schools, and donors to participate. Find out about service learning projects and other information at the Ride for Life website at www.rideforlife.com.

The American Cancer Society's Relay for Life brings together entire communities to take part in the fight against cancer. Half Hollow Hills will be hosting a Relay for Life on May 31 to June 1. It's a time and place where people come to celebrate those who have survived cancer, remember those lost, and support research to fight a disease that touches too many lives. Sign up to join the relay or to donate at the Relay for Life website:
<http://events.cancer.org/RFLhalfhollowhillsNY>