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The Northeast Foundation for Children

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Community Service Learning ***Merging active learning with civic action***

By Pamela Roberts

Community service learning combines students' service to the community with academic learning and is a valuable experiential teaching and learning method for all grade levels, from elementary through high school. My introduction to this relatively recent development in educational reform came through helping with a community service project at Greenfield Center School, Northeast Foundation for Children's K-8 laboratory school in Greenfield, Massachusetts.

Last fall, students in two combined 5th-6th grade classes made fleece hats to give to a local program which provides clothing to area kids in need. It was a very successful community service project. The students contributed something tangible and useful to other kids, they received recognition from the press for their efforts, and they had a basic introduction to using a sewing machine.

However, when one of the teachers and I discussed the project afterwards, we agreed that something was missing. Some of the kids just didn't "get" it. They were making the hats because the teacher told them to do so, not because they saw a need to help. They hadn't integrated the rationale behind the project, which was that in New England winters, children need warm clothing that many families can't afford. And, the project had been separate from their "real" work, their curriculum.

That was when I discovered the difference between community service and community service learning, and how the latter teaches civic responsibility while involving students in active learning. For a project to be truly service learning, there needs to be both a community service goal and a learning goal, with time for reflection and assessment.

"I see service learning as the integration of the curriculum we have for kids merged with delivering a service to the community," said Laura Baker, principal of Greenfield Center School. "It is different than community service, which is doing something for others, because it is about the primary curricular piece." Whereas a community service project might replace an academic part of the day, service learning is part of the curriculum. "It's part of defining how we think of curriculum; it is one of the goals of curriculum instead of separate from it," she said.

"Sometimes all that's needed is to give a little tweak to the curriculum to turn it into a service learning project," Baker said. She described a Monarch butterfly study that was part of the combined 3rd-4th grade curriculum at Shutesbury (MA) Elementary School where she was formerly principal. There, the addition of one piece—tagging the butterflies—turned it into a

service learning project. When students found an organization that tracks Monarchs and listed the butterfly numbers on the Internet, they were suddenly making a real contribution to the scientific community. "It was so exciting," Baker said, "because it made the study real."

As for the above-mentioned fleece hat project, Baker suggested that a study of weather and its effects on people might turn it into a community service project. Students might find that extreme weather could be dangerous for two populations—summer heat for the elderly and winter cold for children. Then the question, "What do we want to do about that?" might be answered by making warm hats for children in need.

"While we don't have a predetermined end in mind," Baker said, "kids would figure out and act on a solution which would be tied to our curricular goals."

Margaret Collins, until recently the Director of Community Service Learning for the Hampshire County (MA) Educational Collaborative, described the two strategies for developing a service learning project. One is to look at the curriculum first and then come up with a project by asking, "What would you like your students to learn?" The other is to start with some real needs or problems in your school or community that students could address.

"When you work through these two ideas, you come up with a community service learning experience. Involving students in this process is always a good idea. " A final critical ingredient is a time and method for reflection and assessment, such as journal writing or group discussion.

Although for teachers, community service learning initially involves more work, Collins stressed that the "payoffs are so rich," because the learning is experiential and the kids are far more invested. Service learning works especially well at the middle school level and elementary grades where teachers are used to flowing from one subject to the next. For younger children who cannot go out into the community on their own and who need a smaller community that they can understand, service learning projects are school-based. Projects for younger children (K-4) might include using math and science skills to plan and plant a school garden; merging environmental studies and dramatic arts to establish a school recycling program and introduce it to other students by staging a play; or, learning letter writing skills by writing thank you letters to school volunteers.

Jan Demers, first grade teacher at Crocker Farms Elementary School in Amherst, Massachusetts, is an enthusiastic advocate of community service learning, citing the feelings of empowerment that children gain from it. She recalls the time her first graders undertook an unusual but highly successful community service project when they became fed up with encountering dog droppings on their playground. The children worked in committees to research diseases carried in feces and relevant laws in their community. They documented evidence, conducted a publicity campaign, and designed signs to make their playground cleaner.

Demers called the project "gratifying" because it "was something that affected the children directly and they saw the power of working together to address a problem."

She said that the additional work generated by community service learning mainly involves organizing things, such as soliciting parental assistance. "The heart of it is to have the children do as much work as possible," she said. She also noted that funding is available for community service learning, "part of which includes a stipend for the teacher for the extra work." Demers

feels that community service learning is "very worthwhile. It helps children to think of their responsibility as citizens in a democratic society."

Center School's principal Laura Baker echoed this belief and aligned community service learning with the philosophy of *The Responsive Classroom*® approach to teaching and learning. "It is a natural," she said, "because it integrates social and academic learning which is a primary goal of *The Responsive Classroom*."

Pamela Roberts is a free lance writer and Greenfield Center School parent.

For more information about community service learning:

Community Service Learning: A Guide to Including Service in the Public School Curriculum (Sunny Series, Democracy and Education) by Rahima C. Wade (Editor), George H. Wood (Editor), Suny Press, Albany NY, 1997. \$21.95 in paperback.

This comprehensive book takes an in-depth look at the components of community service learning from elementary through high school levels. It includes ideas for programs, reflection activities and assessment. There are accounts from teachers, students and administrators as well as resources for funding community service learning programs.

Classrooms in the Community: Hampshire County Teachers Explore Community Service Learning. Nancy Ratner with Joan Schuman and Margaret Collins. Hampshire Educational Collaborative, 97 Hawley Street, Northampton, MA 01060. 1997. Call (413) 586-4900 for this free booklet.

This free booklet tells the above-mentioned story of Jan Demers' first grade class tackling the problem of dog droppings on the playground as a community service learning project. There are also detailed examples of other community service learning projects for elementary through high school grades.

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Department of Service Learning
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Website: <http://www.cns.gov>**

Created in 1993 by The National and Community Service Trust Act, this federal program oversees Learn and Serve, which provides funding and training for service learning programs for school-age youth, as well as Americorps for college-age youth and National Senior Service Corps for Americans over 55.

**National Service Learning Clearinghouse
University of Minnesota
1954 Buford Avenue
Room R-460
St. Paul, MN 55108
Phone: (800) 808-SERV (7378)
Website: [http:// www.nicsl.coled.umn.edu](http://www.nicsl.coled.umn.edu)**

This clearinghouse at the University of Minnesota, a collaboration of 12 institutions and

organizations, has it all—funding sources, project ideas, and other resources for K through higher education.

National Youth Leadership Council

1910 W. County Road B

St. Paul, MN 55113

Phone: (651) 631-3672

Website: [http// www.nylc.org](http://www.nylc.org)

This organization develops service learning programs nationally which serve as models for educational reform.