

# Enriching Learning Through Service: A Tale of Three Districts

A look at community service programs in three Washington school districts highlights elements critical to their success, as well as important barriers that must be overcome.

In June 1988 three Washington State school districts—Issaquah, Peninsula, and Tacoma—formed Project Service Leadership (PSL) to help youth develop the qualities of caring and responsibility so essential for our democracy. The members of the coalition made a three-year commitment to plan, implement, and evaluate district service learning programs.

All three districts agreed that service learning, to be effective, must be an integral part of the existing course of study. Accordingly, district personnel identified ways to incorporate meaningful service learning experiences into their present curriculums, and each district has developed its own distinct expression of service. This article briefly describes their programs, the factors critical to their success, and some obstacles they needed to overcome.

## Three Distinct Expressions of Service

Issaquah School District is committed to infusing service into its K-12 curriculum through community partnerships. The elementary school focuses on service to home and school; the middle school emphasizes service to home, school, and local community; and the high school will expand service to include the global community. As an expression of this partnership, the district service facilitator (Jim Sieber) helps students and teachers meet community needs, and he helps teachers make curricular links.

Through a similar partnership with the city and local recycling companies, Issaquah has become a recycling district. They no longer purchase styrofoam and have piloted a comprehensive

paper and aluminum recycling effort.

As part of its site-based decision making, each school is encouraged to expand youth service projects. For example, teachers at Liberty High School, in partnership with the Environmental Protection Agency, are planning to integrate the instruction of science, English, and social studies as they study a local environmental question. Scientific methods and concepts will enable students to assess the current status of the environmental concern; social studies skills will help them understand the economic, environmental, and political factors that contribute to local policy development; and students will use language arts skills to communicate their findings to the general public and policymakers. Two other schools are involved in a similar effort.

Tacoma, the second school district, has established a policy that encourages all students to contribute to their community before graduating, and students can receive credit upon completing 75 hours of service and a reflection activity. They may complete this credit through school courses that include large-scale service learning projects; though membership in organizations like Campfire, Scouts, 4-H, or church groups that complete a community project; by volunteering directly with agencies; or by completing a comprehensive study of a community issue. The criteria were established centrally, but the schools have created their own program designs. Three high schools, for example, have held Safe Street Summits to plan ways to help make their streets drug-free and safe; and a team of students in one school has organized a service club. At one school,

the career center encourages and recognizes service by making it a part of each student's career file. This helps students to see how service can be an important part of career preparation.

The third district, the Peninsula Schools, began by focusing on one school, Gig Harbor High, where 22 teachers are enriching their classroom instruction through service learning opportunities. For example:

- Students in Spanish classes are tutoring English-as-second-language students.
- A biology class is working with the neighboring elementary school to develop a science enrichment program.
- Students in leadership class serve as "big brothers" and "big sisters" for struggling elementary students.

Throughout the school, all teachers are encouraged to enrich their programs through service.

This district's teachers, from elementary, middle, and high schools, are now developing a rich array of service projects with the intent to make service an integral part of education.

## Key Elements of Service Learning Programs

The three districts participating in Project Service Leadership found that six elements contributed to the success of their programs.

1. *Communication.* From the very beginning, it was necessary to communicate the plans and progress of the programs to parents, students, teachers, administrators, and board members. Regular reports to the board, to principals, to student senates, and to PTAs have been part of the communi-

cation process. In addition, videos and written materials describing the program and suggesting service learning projects have been developed for teachers and community organizations.

With service programs especially, community agencies, students, business representatives, and parents, as well as school personnel, should be part of the planning process and should participate in all decision making along the way. In Tacoma, for example, the steering committee includes all of these constituents. And in Issaquah, local businesses have helped organize and implement the district's recycling project.

2. *Professional development.* A second essential element is professional development. In response to this need, the coalition sponsored the first annual kick-off conference in the spring of 1989 at which principals, teachers, and students from around the country presented their service programs and discussed the elements important for success. Following the conference, these resource people visited specific schools to explain their programs in greater depth and respond to key questions. This event helped participating districts to see the national significance of their efforts and expanded both individual and district visions for service.

In July 1989, district leaders became aware of service learning research results and interacted with national leaders in service learning during a week-long teacher leadership conference sponsored by the National Youth Leadership Council. The following month, they helped teachers develop and implement plans to enrich classroom learning through service. These teacher leaders will now provide staff development and coaching for their buildings and district. As a follow-up to the conference, teachers meet periodically to discuss ideas and to resolve problems, and a newsletter for teachers throughout the state is now available.

At teachers' requests, conferences and collaborative planning sessions are being organized around specific subject areas, for example, an upcoming conference will bring together representatives from various organizations to help teachers and students explore ways youth can participate in

research and environmental projects that can help their communities.

Finally, a State Service Library of curriculum materials, videos, and articles helps participants become aware of various model service learning programs.

3. *Site leadership.* The presence of a coordinator at the high school or district ensures that teacher participation in projects is encouraged and recognized. These coordinators receive either a stipend or a released period to develop service projects, serve as liaisons between community agencies and schools, and coordinate service programs. Each district is also exploring ways to provide additional time for teachers during the day for their efforts.

4. *District support.* To provide visible district support, each participating superintendent made a three-year commitment to service learning and designated one district-level administrator to fill the role of persistent and vocal champion of service learning and its benefits.

5. *Accommodating the particular district and school culture.* A significant success factor of the programs is the districts' conviction that each building should develop its own service plan. As each school's leader facilitates and coordinates the planning, a team of interested teachers is developing a variety of service options and grappling with ways to encourage an ethic of service.

6. *Time.* Finally, the districts provide the time that teachers and coordinators need to plan, discuss, air concerns, and resolve problems.

### **Overcoming Barriers to Success**

Establishing meaningful service learning programs that contribute both to student learning and to the community has not been easy. Few citizens question the value of service learning, but the static images of community service and organizational structures can inhibit successful implementation. The difficulty of evaluation is another obstacle.

*Static images of service learning.* It takes time and vivid examples to develop creative ways to infuse service into the curriculum and to expand participants' definition of community to include home and school and the global as well as the local community.

And then, people tend to think of community service exclusively as volunteerism, which conjures up concerns about liability, transportation, and convoluted schedules. But frequently schools can discover community needs that they can meet within the classroom. For example, in their own classroom the industrial arts class at Foss High School planned and constructed a chair for a disabled child. Partnerships with community agencies, such as the Scouts, strengthen the community agency and provide a liability umbrella for off-campus experiences. Teachers in Project Service Leadership are exploring ways students can teach what they have learned to others, ways course content can help solve a community concern, and ways class products can help others. Not only are these new ideas logistically feasible, but they add a spark to the classroom curriculum.

*Organizational structures.* High schools are organized in such fragmented ways that it is difficult to find time for planning, exploring, and examination. While most of the schools are infusing service into the existing curriculum, Gig Harbor High School is reorganizing its schedule and curriculum to make service a major theme of its restructuring efforts. Liberty High School, by developing a three-period block for its environmental service program, hopes to establish greater flexibility for service experiences and planning time. One middle school in Issaquah is also exploring ways to schedule community service experiences so that they provide a block of planning time for teachers. By examining various ways to configure time, participating schools are discovering how they can more effectively facilitate service experiences and reflect upon them.

*The evaluation process.* Schools and districts are often evaluated by the public on the basis of standardized tests, which do not assess the meaningful outcomes of service learning—a sense of community membership, willingness and capacity to participate in the community, compassion and caring for others. We are beginning to develop classroom and building assessments that will evaluate these outcomes and that eventually will become a part of the regular appraisal process.

### From Knowing to Doing

From their experiences, the three districts have realized that service learning opportunities not only provide important community assistance, but also make academic learning more engaging, helping students make the connection between knowing and doing. As Spanish students tutor new immigrants, for example, they develop a deeper understanding of the language they are studying and a greater appreciation for the Hispanic culture. By developing a lesson plan, they must struggle to discover an effective way to explain an idea. By conversing with others in a second language, they develop more integrated understanding of the subjects in their textbooks.

Service activities also strengthen students' higher-level thinking skills.

For example, in building the chair for an 18-month-old child with multiple sclerosis, the industrial arts class at Foss High School applied skills of design and problem solving as they (1) selected a material that would provide both stability and mobility and (2) planned an expandable design that could grow with the child.

When schools and the community pull together, the benefits are far reaching. A student at Gig Harbour High, reflecting on her experience working at a homeless shelter, put it well:

I was initially opposed to the whole service learning thing. [But] I have [now] changed my attitude almost completely. Until you witness poverty and homelessness firsthand, it will not have an impact. It does not take much firsthand exposure to a human

need to get personally involved and begin to care. I am becoming convinced that just a little time required in community service will yield a lifetime of dedication to help. □

*Authors' note:* To obtain more information about Project Service Leadership and service learning efforts in Washington, contact Project Service Leadership, 2810 Commanche Dr., Mt. Vernon, WA 98273; (206) 428-7614. PSL is part of the National Service Learning Initiative, NYLC, 1910 W. County Rd. B, Roseville, MN 55113; 1-800-366-6952.

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— RICHARD LODISH —

## A Lesson for a Lifetime

Wednesday "soup days" and Saturday "family days" are two of the ways a Washington, D.C., school's staff and its students and their families are serving the local community.

The call to service should come early and should be a vital part of the education for citizenship in every school system in the nation. The lesson of service learned in youth will last a lifetime.

—Senator Edward Kennedy, introducing a \$300 million volunteerism proposal to the Senate, July 27, 1989

*Photograph courtesy of Richard Lodish, Sidwell Friends School, Washington, D.C.*

*Preparing sandwiches at Martha's Table, a nearby soup kitchen, is one of several ways the Sidwell Friends School "family" helps their less fortunate neighbors.*



How early is "early"? What lesson of service should young children learn? I asked a 3rd grader, "What do you want for the world? What do you want for yourself?"

"For the world," he said, "I want enough food and shelter for everyone. For me, I want a GI Joe with a grenade launcher and a swimming pool."

When should young children learn the painful truths about the gap between the haves and the have-nots, between our ideals and the world's realities? Can elementary schools make community service an important part of the lives of their students? For many years, the Sidwell Friends School answered these questions with short-term projects in hospitals, senior citizen homes, and soup kitchens. These projects, while meaningful, did not have a lasting impact on our students or on their families.

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