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Community Service Learning And School Improvement in Springfield, Massachusetts

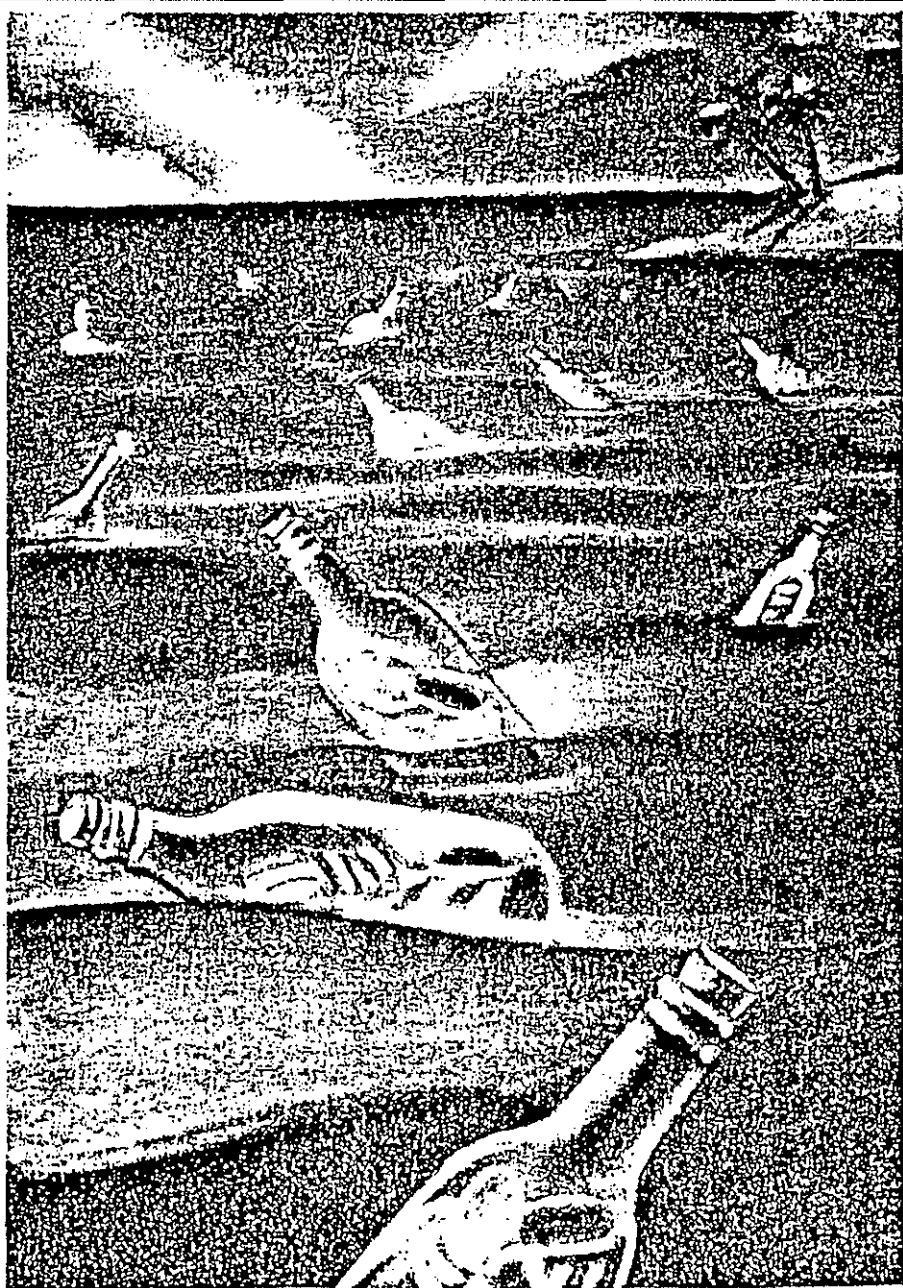
Educators in Springfield see connections between the current agenda for school reform and their own program of Community Service Learning. For details, read on.

BY VIRGINIA ANDERSON, CAROL KINSLEY, PETER NEGRONI, AND CAROLYN PRICE

CALLS FOR changes in the education system continually issue forth from various segments of society. Each outpouring of public concern challenges educators to address the needs of young people and to achieve school renewal. The current literature on school reform advocates an agenda of improvement efforts aimed at creating effective, caring schools that will provide active learning opportunities for students, develop learning communities, expand learning into the community, foster collegiality among staff members, and enable teachers to become "orchestra conductors" in the classroom rather than lecturers. But educators ask, "How can all of this be achieved?"

Educators in Springfield, Massachu-

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setts, believe they have an answer. They see connections between this vision of school improvement and the program of Community Service Learning (CSL) in which they have participated for the past several years. Although the CSL program did not set out to demonstrate such connections, the process of integrating community service with classroom learning had an unanticipated ripple effect throughout the system.

In 1986 Springfield's Mayor Richard Neal (now a U.S. representative), who was chairperson of the district's school committee, suggested that a community service program should be started in the schools. Inspired by Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* and by his own experiences as a social studies teacher, Neal saw service as a way of building students' sense of citizenship and increasing their involvement in their communities.

In order to implement Neal's proposal, the district established an office devoted to community service learning, which from the beginning linked learning to the concept of community service. It was determined that, if community service was to be part of the educational process, then it should meet instructional goals and be integrated into the entire K-12 curriculum. The school committee adopted the policy that *all* public school students would participate in community service learning, and CSL was launched. Neal appointed an advisory committee made up of both school and community representatives to work with a district coordinator from the CSL office.

INTEGRATING CSL INTO THE CURRICULUM

Instead of requiring a specific number of hours of community service for high school graduation, the program was designed to give each school the opportunity to determine how it would involve its students in CSL. For principals and teachers who were already active in the efforts of the Red Cross, the March of Dimes, and many other charities, this new policy was perceived as "another thing to do." With the school day already crowded, it was clear that CSL would need to be integrated into the curriculum. Besides, linking service and learning seemed to make sense. Why not use the community as a laboratory for learn-

ing? Why couldn't CSL become "another way of teaching"?

The CSL office developed a set of guidelines to help schools integrate CSL into the educational process. These guidelines were issued to the principals and CSL building representatives (one teacher in each school, whose task was to coordinate that school's effort). The prescribed procedure made use of a thematic approach and had a theoretical foundation in the writings of John Dewey, Hilda Taba, Louise Berman, and Ralph Tyler. In addition, service, reflection, and celebration were all to be integral parts of the CSL experience, which teachers found they could easily organize by going through the following steps:

1. Establish an individual school or classroom service-learning theme.
2. Determine school or classroom objectives.
3. Meet with community representatives.
4. Build a repertoire of activities.
5. Develop learning experiences.
6. Establish a time line.
7. Reflect.
8. Celebrate.

CSL IN ACTION

In order to come up with their service-learning themes, the staff and students first identified existing community needs. Then teachers found ways to use the service experience to motivate students to learn or as the culminating activity of a unit of study. Students who participated in the service activity used it to develop their content skills. The following examples of CSL projects show how service effectively reinforced classroom study.

In the spring of 1988 the Environmental Center of Springfield (ECOS) initiated a service project in which all of the district's 1,500 fifth-graders spent one school day cleaning out a ravine and turning it into a conservation area. Students cleared trails, planted shrubs and bushes, and helped develop a sledding area for the community to use. The service project gave students a better understanding of topics they had studied in the classroom: soil erosion, animal habitats, and plant life. Christopher Collins, the ECOS supervisor, sent letters home to parents, recognizing the students' efforts and inviting families to use the site.

At Freedman School, which serves fifth- and sixth-graders, each classroom "adopted" a resident of a local nursing home. Karen Chartier, the CSL building representative, helped the students communicate with their adopted resident each month. The students sent messages and pictures and sometimes devised special class projects that were directly related to their elderly friends. For example, several students surprised one resident on her 88th birthday. Knowing of her fondness for butterflies, they brought her a "butterfly" cake that they had baked as a class project. Because the resident was a native of Scotland, the students also studied Scotland in their geography class and shared what they had learned with her. Chartier worked with Sally Wittenberg, a staff member of the Springfield School Volunteers, to set up a "phone pal" network. Residents of the nursing home called their "student pals" each day to chat and hear about the day's events.

At Alice B. Beal School, which serves students in grades K-4, the teachers adopted the theme "Helping the Hungry and the Homeless." The major service project took place in the spring, when students collected 140 pounds of sneakers for children in Haiti. As the sneakers piled up, the children weighed them and graphed the progress on a wall chart. They viewed slides of Haiti in geography class and read about the country in their basal reader. A local resident who often travels to Haiti delivered the sneakers to an orphanage there.

Katherine Heaps Kessler, the CSL building representative, observed, "For the first time, many of these youngsters understood poverty. The thing that most affected them was that none of the children in the slides had anything on their feet. By donating their own used sneakers, they really felt they could affect poverty, if only in a small way." A letter arrived from Haiti telling the children that "lots of Haitian boys and girls will have their first pair of shoes, thanks to you." The children were gratified by the acknowledgment of their contribution.

SEEING LONG-TERM EFFECTS

An ethic of service is clearly present in some of the schools that have been involved in the CSL program since its inception four years ago. Two inner-city

magnet schools, Lincoln School (K-4) and Chestnut Street Middle School, provide particularly good examples of this orientation.

Lincoln School. When Lincoln School initiated the CSL program, its primary objective was to develop a sense of community within the school. The school adopted "citizenship" as its service theme. Teachers met to develop criteria to define "Lincoln School Good Citizens." Children were exposed to diverse models of good citizenship from history, literature, and contemporary society. They cut pictures of good citizens out of magazines and covered the walls with them. They wrote stories about citizenship and displayed them on the "Wall of Fame."

In order to make the concept of good citizenship relevant and to reach out to the community, the children held a "good citizen" contest. They nominated parents, grandparents, foster parents, neighbors, social workers, teachers, older brothers and sisters, baby sitters, and camp counselors. Then each class discussed its nominees and elected the one who best exemplified good citizenship. Through participating in and reflecting on these activities, the children learned that good citizens are everywhere. They come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic levels. The common denominator that makes these citizens special is that each of them is a caring, sharing, and loving individual.

The entire school community came together in a grand celebration featuring "Good Citizens on Parade." The children, wearing green-and-white Lincoln School T-shirts, carried banners and balloons,

creating a festive atmosphere. Mounted police, followed by the drill team and a fourth-grade band, led the parade to a nearby park, where each "good citizen" was honored by then-Mayor Neal and many dignitaries.

In recognition of their participation and effort, the children were treated to a concert and given ice cream sundaes and snacks donated by a local citizens' group. Now an annual celebration, the event has come to be known as "Kids' Appreciation Day" and is designated as the time when those who have received services come to the school to thank and acknowledge the children for their efforts.

Lincoln School's participation in CSL has been a developmental process. Curriculum-based, thematic units have been created and implemented. Recipients of services now include the elderly, children's wards at local hospitals, neighborhood social service organizations, and, of course, the school community.

As the school reached out to the community, the response was overwhelming. A cadre of volunteers from neighborhood organizations came forward to share their expertise with the children and to help them expand their vision of community. A school/business partnership with the local power company focused on the concept of CSL. The partnership pays for materials, equipment, and transportation for CSL projects.

Today, the staff at Lincoln School recognizes the value of CSL to students. Staff members view the program as a way to increase student learning, to enrich the curriculum, and to foster the spirit of caring and lifetime service. They believe that, if children are exposed in their formative years to the values of participation in the community, they will internalize those values. They believe that, given the opportunity, students will choose to become interested, involved citizens.

Is there a connection between Lincoln's involvement in service and school improvement? Concurrent with the development and implementation of CSL, the Lincoln School staff began an ongoing process of introspection, analysis, and evaluation in order to determine how staff members could better deliver educational services to children. They realized that, in order to meet the needs of a rapidly changing, technological society, edu-

cation must change. The school was reorganized into instructional teams. Staff development was used for team building and to train teachers in whole-language and cooperative learning techniques. Ongoing training has been designed to help teachers understand how children learn and to provide them with the skills to identify and build on students' individual strengths. By integrating CSL into this instructional approach, the school has created a learning environment that is exciting, stimulating, and motivating — in short, an environment that works for students.

The rewards for the school are both intrinsic and extrinsic. Children's self-esteem has grown, and this heightened sense of self-worth has led to improved academic achievement. The students' scores on the Massachusetts Test of Basic Skills have increased consistently over a three-year period. The motto of CSL at Lincoln School — "Caring, Sharing, Loving" — has become part of the school's ethos. The climate of the school is orderly, friendly, open, and warm. Negative behavior is rare, and children routinely choose to be helpful, kind, and caring. They have been given the opportunity to develop in a setting and structure that focus on the intrinsic rewards that come to those who support and serve one another and the community.

Chestnut Street Middle School. Building a sense of community within Chestnut Street Middle School through the CSL program has consisted of a careful attempt to free staff members and students from the "system" and, in so doing, to empower them to assume responsibility for their choices and actions.

As defined by Chestnut's staff and students, the concept of community begins with one's own family and then extends to the school, the city, and so on, in a widening circle that eventually embraces the world and all its peoples. The Chestnut approach to CSL always revolves around some global theme, such as "Be a Good Neighbor" or "Reach Up and Reach Out." The theme serves as the umbrella under which students and teachers develop a variety of activities.

In an inner-city school, teachers, parents, and students alike often have a hard time raising the expectations that they have for themselves and for others. The theme "Reach Up and Reach Out" has in-



"I want to go to Yale or Princeton."

spired all those associated with the school to set their sights higher and to assume responsibility for others and for themselves. The concept was introduced on the first day of school in September. The Chestnut parents, students, and teachers were all asked to look toward the sky. They were told not to be limited by the roof over their heads but to go beyond what they could see, to reach out to the heavens and become a star. In one mathematics classroom, shiny stars with the names of all the children were hung overhead.

As CSL has matured, the practice of reflecting on what was learned, how the knowledge was applied, how it made students feel, and how it benefited others has become a key to changing attitudes and behaviors among the students and staff members and to making improvements in the learning program. The sense of community that was cultivated during the first two years of the program evolved into a much more sophisticated interdisciplinary approach to learning that now influences everything that takes place at Chestnut.

For example, the entire seventh-grade Gold House is organized so that the theme of community is examined in all subjects. Students in the house have been assigned to study one of five world communities in their language arts, social studies, math, science, and reading classes. Eventually, they will learn about the impact of their community on the others.

Each teacher in the Gold House picked one community service project to participate in with the students. The teachers' method of introducing the projects to their students taught about commitment in a highly symbolic way. The students were asked to trace their hands on construction paper, cut the forms out, write their names on them, and bring them to an assembly the next day.

On the walls of the auditorium were huge paper hands, each marked with the name of a community service project. Each teacher or agency representative introduced his or her project and told why it was important. Each student was then encouraged to select the large hand representing the community service project he or she wanted to work with and to place the outline of his or her own hand on that large hand. Students were told that only those who wished to participate

should do so and that they could change their minds in the next few days.

The students took this selection process very seriously, and some did change their minds. After a few days, every youngster in the Gold House had made a commitment to a community service project and had placed his or her hand on one of the large ones.

Students began participating in their service experiences in October. And the teachers used the projects as the basis of lessons in the appropriate subject areas. For example, all students in the Gold House classes solved mathematics problems related to seating arrangements at the Paramount Theatre, where some students served as ushers for the New England Puppet Series. Social studies classes looked at the effects of Red Cross projects worldwide and discussed the factors that have contributed to the need for help around the world. In language arts classes students kept journals and reflected on their service experiences.

Chestnut's schoolwide Brothers and Sisters program has been one of the most successful service initiatives. In a neighborhood where gangs flourish, the group now boasts 140 members. Older students in the Brothers and Sisters program check younger ones' homework, visit them at home, meet them before and after school to work together on projects, share quiet moments with them in school, and show that they care about them. Early in 1990, students in the program attended a Saturday seminar in which, guided by teachers and counselors, they explored bias, brainstormed about exactly what a friend is, discussed peer pressure, and exchanged ideas about what they could bring to another student in a helping relationship.

While adding new service initiatives, Chestnut continues to build on its first community service theme, "Be a Good Neighbor." Service experiences based on this theme have given students a sense of local history and an understanding of their relationship to the school's neighborhood, whether they live in it or come to Chestnut through the citywide magnet school program.

Students researched and produced a video called "Portrait of a Neighborhood." An exploration of the neighborhood's heritage, the program has been shown on the local cable station and continues to be used by students and teachers

as an orientation for new students.

The neighborhood theme has inspired an annual "Be a Good Neighbor Workday." In 1991 the event was organized as a Hispanic neighborhood festival. Parents and students planned the festival together, focusing on ways to help one another in the school neighborhood.

Including CSL in the educational equation at Chestnut Street Middle School has made a difference in the school community and has helped create the kind of caring school climate that is necessary for learning to occur. Because CSL is not an "add-on" program, the ethic of service has become pervasive in the school. The integration of CSL into the academic and social life of the school has provided a framework for teaching students in such a way that they will be able to meet their own needs while recognizing, responding to, and respecting the needs of others.

CSL AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Does CSL help advance the agenda for school improvement? The evidence from schools in Springfield clearly indicates that it does. One of the most obvious links between CSL programs and recommendations for improvement is a focus on active learning. When a school develops service projects and interdisciplinary team experiences, active learning becomes part of the pedagogy. Cooperation and collaboration are inherent in the process of planning and carrying out service experiences. CSL harnesses the energy of all to create the necessary conditions for building a learning community, and students can bring the lessons of service into their own lives. They learn by doing, and in the process they begin to shape their own behavior. They start to understand how they want to relate to others and to themselves. They truly have an opportunity to become socially responsible adults.

Beyond these benefits, Springfield's service experiences clearly demonstrate that everyone — regardless of economic or social level — can serve. The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said, "Everyone can be great because everyone can serve." The Springfield CSL experience validates King's observation. With meaning and purpose, CSL provides an integrated, active, and vital way to educate young people.