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6

Creating a School and Community Culture to Sustain Service Learning

Caroline Allam, Managing Director, KIDS Consortium,
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You guys have always done this stuff for us. It's our town. We're the ones that are going to have to run the town after you old guys are gone. We ought to get a shot at making some decisions about the future (Lysen 1992, p. 8).

This strong sentiment came from a Bath Junior High School student who was working with peers, teachers, scientists, and other community members to conduct water quality tests on the Kennebec River in Maine. The statement reflects the desire and willingness of young people to work together, to assume responsibility and stewardship for their communities, and to acquire the knowledge and skills for informed decision making and citizenship. And it represents our collective hope for millions of other young adolescents.

According to the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989), the middle school years represent the last best chance for young people to choose a path toward productive and fulfilling lives. Those who make "fateful choices" may grow into adults "who are alienated from other people, who have low expectations for themselves, and for whom society has low expectations." Those who are "left behind" are likely to be the unhealthy, the addicted, the criminal, the violent, and the poor (Carnegie Council 1989).

What kind of school and community environment will help nurture the intellectual, social, and personal development of adolescents? How

will we help young people become, as the Carnegie report suggests, intellectually reflective, productive, healthy, caring, and ethical citizens? The essence of an approach that responds to these demands must be a teaching and learning strategy that involves, engages, and empowers young people as workers, resources, and entrepreneurs in their schools and communities—and a school and community culture that values and sustains this approach.

Service Learning as Authentic Learning

Over the past four years, the KIDS (Kids Involved Doing Service) Consortium, a nonprofit organization in Portland, Maine, has helped schools and communities across New England design authentic educational strategies that involve students in tackling real-life problems as part of their English, science, social studies, and mathematics curriculum. Through a model called "KIDS as Planners," students not only learn subject matter in a meaningful and relevant context, but they also learn that they can make a difference as citizens and stewards of their schools and communities.

For example, middle school students have made important contributions to their towns by monitoring soil and water quality, documenting neighborhood and cultural history, conducting inventories of natural resources, developing and maintaining nature trails, designing playgrounds and green spaces, and mapping local wetlands. These projects provide a focus for integrating content and for helping students demonstrate the knowledge and skills outlined in Maine's Common Core of Learning, a bold vision of what all students should know and be able to do when they graduate from high school.

In addition, research has shown that opportunities for young people to participate in the life of their school and community help them develop problem-solving skills, social competence, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future—attributes that enable them to bounce back from at-risk environments and lead healthy, productive lives. In other words, participation is prevention (Benard 1991).

The implementation of service learning, however, is often mired in concerns for logistics, such as training, supervision, transportation, and liability. The answers to these issues cannot be found in easy-to-read pamphlets. Most of the logistics are institutional barriers that will be addressed when a cultural shift occurs within schools and communities and service learning becomes the common *modus operandi*.

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A City's Vision for Change

The city of Bath is a proud, old community on the coast of Maine, with a population of about 10,000. It is home to rich environmental treasures like the Kennebec River and the Merrymeeting Bay; a historic, revitalized, downtown shopping district; massive traffic problems on the Carlton Bridge; and an economy dependent on Bath Iron Works, the state's largest employer and the builder of the Aegis destroyer.

To encourage broad-based citizen participation in Bath's comprehensive planning process, the KIDS Consortium collaborated with City Planner Matthew Eddy to involve the community's most neglected resource—its youth. A plan is more than a piece of paper, according to Eddy; it is an expression of a city's vision of its future and its desired quality of life. This vision and the means to achieve it serve as a guide to influence all facets of community life and provide direction for future decision making.

The Bath Comprehensive Planning and Education Committee was created to coordinate efforts between planners and local educators. It included representatives from schools, Bath Iron Works, the Bath Historical Society, the Patten Free Library, the Maine Maritime Museum, the Chamber of Commerce, environmental groups, and city agencies. The committee's purpose was to establish a new rapport between those who were creating the guide to the city's future and those responsible for shaping the lives of the children who would lead it.

The committee created a new role and a new meaning for the word *community* in community service. Communities are not just places where kids serve, and service is not just a nice activity to keep kids busy. Representatives of public and private agencies, from the city electrician to the local historian, provide technical expertise to help students plan and carry out projects that have a long-term impact on the quality of life in the town. For example, one of the first projects in Bath teamed 7th graders with scientists at the Bigelow Laboratory, a privately owned marine research facility. Scientists taught students how to conduct water quality tests on the Kennebec River. Working in teams aboard a vessel furnished by Bath Iron Works, students determined water pollution levels in different sites of the city.

Based on their results, teams wrote recommendations to the city's Comprehensive Planning Committee regarding future land use—the lands the students will ultimately inherit. Students proposed rehabilitating a disused shipyard for recreational use, upgrading the town's Sewage Treatment Plant, and an immediate cleanup of polluted sites.

Based on a content analysis of letters to the committee, these students demonstrated an interest in community life (100 percent), a strong sense of responsibility to the community (86 percent), great enthusiasm for the learning process (73 percent), and a strong sense of efficacy (60 percent). Ultimately, the consensus that students were able to reach had a positive effect on members of the committee, who, up to that point, could reach no consensus (Kingsland 1993). All KIDS projects continue to be linked to the city's comprehensive plan.

The Comprehensive Planning and Education Committee, on the other hand, no longer exists, because it was successful in fulfilling its mission, to the point where educators were able to establish their own, independent working relationships with public and private officials to continue planning and carrying out community projects. The partnership ultimately led to a school board policy to endorse community-based learning for all K-12 students.

A School's Vision for Change

Service learning helps schools teach a core academic program for all students, the major tenet of all school restructuring initiatives. Indeed, a team of math, science, language arts, and social studies teachers at Bath Junior High School agreed that KIDS as Planners is completely compatible with their educational goals and objectives. To sustain and institutionalize this kind of teaching and learning, however, these teachers stressed the need for support from within the school. They would need time to plan, discuss, and integrate curriculum; longer and flexible blocks of instructional time; administrative leadership; involvement and support of parents; and assistance with logistical coordination of field visits (Kingsland 1993).

The institutionalization of service learning, from just a few teachers to a critical mass, from a special project to a sustainable teaching strategy, requires institutional change. Despite the fact that these highly motivated practitioners said that they would continue to implement the KIDS model and encourage their colleagues to become involved, sustaining and expanding faculty involvement would ultimately require a new vision of teaching and learning supported by changes in scheduling, organization, resources, assessment, and professional roles. Although service learning demands institutional changes and may even facilitate changes, it does not always guarantee them.

In the fall of 1994, Bath Junior High School formally became Bath Middle School. Over the past two years, a middle school committee composed of parents, teachers, and administrators defined the guiding principles that would transform the school into "a place where people want to be." The principles include a core curriculum of reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies for all students; instructional grouping that reflects validated research; interdisciplinary teaching; flexible blocks of instructional time; small communities of learning guided by caring adults who know each child well; parent involvement; and common planning time for teaching teams. In addition, the committee recommended that "citizenship and community service be emphasized as part of the educational process."

To facilitate these changes, the school district and the middle school agreed to participate in KIDSNET (Kids Involved Doing Service in New England Towns), a three-year national demonstration project funded by the Corporation for National Service. Sponsored by the KIDS Consortium, KIDSNET will build the capacity of five school districts in Maine, Vermont, and Connecticut to use KIDS as Planners as a vehicle for helping students meet high academic standards based on each state's Common Core of Learning. The leadership team for the project—a team of four teachers at Bath Middle School, plus the district's substance abuse counselor—recruited 14 colleagues into the KIDS process, representing about one-third of the faculty and 385 students. Each team researched and identified an interdisciplinary project that could be carried out across teams or with the local elementary school and high school. Examples include composting lunchroom waste, designing a school courtyard for outdoor activities, developing a management plan for 135 acres of pristine public land known as Butler Cove, and renovating the McMann Field Complex for athletic and recreational use. People representing such interests as the Bath Department of Parks and Cemeteries and the school hot lunch program will serve as critical resources to help students research, design, and carry out solutions to significant problems in their school and community environments.

Ultimately, KIDS will be sustained not only by institutional changes at the middle school but by the ownership of teachers as frontline advocates and leaders for change. KIDSNET is neither a collection of isolated KIDS projects nor a program run in the school by an outside agency. Instead, it demonstrates the value of capacity building, creating new roles and responsibilities for teachers. For example, Paula Evans is a veteran 7th grade teacher who has become a liaison and facilitator for KIDS as Planners projects. As a leader of a teaching team, she has

recruited her own team into the process, consulted with other teams to develop projects, coordinated projects across schools, trained teachers from other school systems, and participated in professional workshops and conferences to facilitate staff development activities at the school. Over the next three years, KIDSNET will create a cadre of local advocates, like Paula, including teachers, administrators, students, and community members, who facilitate the institutionalization of the KIDS model in many ways:

- as a participant in a school or community-based network that provides a forum for sharing and support
- as an on-site facilitator who coaches the involvement of teachers new to the KIDS process
- as a trainer, facilitator, or presenter at a KIDS workshop or local faculty meeting
- as a mentor to a student-teacher
- as a consultant who communicates with interested audiences beyond their own school systems
- as a presenter of the KIDS model at a state, regional, or national conference
- as an author of an article on the KIDS model for local or professional audiences
- as an organizer or planner of any of these activities

Service learning not only demands changes within schools and communities; but, by changing roles and relationships among students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members, service learning also helps to facilitate cultural shifts and foster collegiality, enthusiasm, recognition, high expectations, responsibility, and an ethic of caring. These cultural shifts within our communities and institutions will ultimately help us achieve the most important transition of all—to the creation of a culture that encourages and values youth at the turning point of their lives.

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7

How Do We Make a Difference in Our Community?

Len Solo, Principal, Graham & Parks Alternative Public School,
Cambridge, Massachusetts

We are witnessing a profound loss of community in the United States. People have turned away from caring about others to caring about themselves. Evidence of this loss, accelerated from a trend in the early 1960s, has become a major feature of life in the latter part of the 20th century. Loss of community is seen everywhere: the number of homeless people on the streets; the number of children living in poverty; the physical and verbal violence everywhere; the rise in intolerance of groups toward each other; the increase in racial incidents; townspeople, even neighbors, not caring for or even knowing each other; the litter on the roads and in the streets; the decline of services available to the poor; and the sense of loneliness and isolation felt by many. At Graham & Parks Alternative Public School, we believe that we *can* and *must* teach students how to develop community, to be a part of a community, and to live in communities.

Graham & Parks Alternative Public School is a K-8 school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Three hundred and seventy students participate in the school program, which is guided by an open education philosophy. Len Solo has been the principal since 1974.