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Michelle Boorstein

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Community Service Learning Is a Foregone Conclusion at the Lincoln Elementary School

Michelle Boorstein, Reporter,
Associated Press, Providence, Rhode Island

For the staff at Lincoln Elementary School in Springfield, Massachusetts, articulating the many ways in which community service learning affects their school is nearly impossible. The principal says he doesn't require people to do community service. Yet, on any given day, students all over the school are learning through service projects.

"Community service is just something that we do; you don't say to someone, 'Go do a community service project,'" said Enrique Figueredo, Lincoln's principal for the past three years and an avid proponent of community service learning. "It is part of our school. We live it," he said.

Lincoln's staff may appear casual in defining exactly how they integrate community service learning into their daily routines, but their actions speak definitively: Just do it.

At the time this chapter was written, I was a reporter with the *Springfield Union News*, Springfield, Massachusetts.

Built in 1910, Lincoln School is in the North End section of Springfield, Massachusetts, a city of about 180,000 people. The school is a K-5 magnet school for computers and other technology. Until about five years ago, 98 percent of Lincoln's students were Hispanic. Through school choice and busing, the population is now about 48 percent Hispanic, 33 percent African American, 17 percent white, and 2 percent other (including Pakistani and Vietnamese).

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Deliberately seeking "a sense of community" as part of a districtwide initiative, the Lincoln staff developed their community-service-learning program in 1987. Crime deeply permeated the school's inner-city neighborhood, an increasing number of students were being bused in—the number is currently at 55 percent—and there were the usual structural problems that come with an 84-year-old building constructed with no gym, cafeteria, or auditorium.

Good Citizenship

The school adopted "good citizenship" as their theme. While educating students about citizenship during language arts classes, teachers asked the students to nominate good citizens. Soon, a school "Wall of Fame" displayed dozens of written and drawn nominations of neighbors, staff, and other community members. Each class elected their good citizen from the nominations. These good citizens were then honored in a celebration called "Good Citizens on Parade." Everyone from the mayor and mounted police to the 4th grade band participated in the parade, which featured the "good citizens" the students had selected. Parents, grandparents, foster parents, camp counselors, and social workers marched along with children wearing Lincoln t-shirts and carrying banners and balloons.

Although this carefully crafted event occurred several years ago, in the spring of 1987, the school's culture of citizenship, caring, and service is still so pervasive that staff, students, parents and the neighbors expect it. In essence, the community-service-learning process made sense to the Lincoln School family because of their beliefs and teaching practices.

Daily Service Learning

"Service experiences don't always have to be some big production," said Mary Lou Pieczarka, a 5th grade teacher at the school since 1987, of bringing community service learning into the daily curriculum. "I think when you try and separate it and say, 'This is community service learning,' I'm not sure that children always have to be told that."

Pieczarka observed that reflection on the service experiences is an important part of the community-service-learning process. In a one-month period, for example, her students did a unit on homelessness and

took a tour of the dietary wing of the nearby Baystate Medical Center before cooking meals for shelters; in math, boxes of macaroni and pounds of cheese became variables for equations; and in writing class, children wrote stories based on their interaction with people living on the street and with hospital professionals. "Using the thematic method, you don't have to say, 'I've got to do math, I've got to do English, now what am I going to do for community service learning?' It all fits together naturally," Pieczarka said.

Service learning at Lincoln continues on several levels. While a daily subject like chorus becomes a concert at the pediatric unit of the medical center, there is also service for the school community itself in which students strive to be "student of the week." Winners receive a certificate from the school store. An art class makes invitations for retired Lincoln School employees to return for a holiday party. A project with senior citizens from the neighborhood blends into geography as the students study the seniors' native countries.

A New Community Playground

Although Principal Figueredo was certainly proud to tick off an immediate list of the daily service projects going on at the time, one service project was clearly of major significance.

"You have to see the playground," he said, flashing photo after photo of the two-year, \$30,000 project that involved neighborhood children of various ages, families, big and small businesses, a local television station, the police, and other municipal employees. "It's our pride and joy." Inspired by the goal of ownership, hundreds of people volunteered time, services, and funds to turn asphalt and dirt behind the school into the neighborhood's only playground. The project saved the city \$9,000 and culminated on one rainy weekend when "people just kept working like nothing was coming out of the sky," Figueredo recalled, beaming.

The contributors included two of the area's largest businesses, Baystate Medical Center and Western Massachusetts Electric Co. (WMECO). The hospital's planning department designed the playground; and WMECO, who had offered to do the digging for the project, ultimately hired a professional excavator when their company's own equipment was unable to handle the hard dirt they encountered. A local television station donated film of the project for Lincoln's archives.

"I leave here at 5:30 or 6 o'clock at night—in the dark sometimes—and I look back and 15 or 16 kids are still on the playground," Figueredo

said with a grin. Though the school could have acquired the funds through a budgetary appeal, "It was essential that it was a community project," he said. "As you know, it's been proven that if people build something in their neighborhood or backyard, it's going to be taken care of a little better than if someone was hired to do it."

Opening Doors

Educators at Lincoln have said that well-designed and-executed service-learning projects, with both service *and* reflection components, have opened doors for some students unable to excel in the traditional academic environment.

Figueredo loves to tell the story of one 4th grader—"not a stand-out in terms of academics"—who entered a citywide poster contest for Children's Safety Month. The winning poster would be displayed on a billboard on Interstate 91, the major highway running directly through the city. While waiting with the 38 other finalists to hear the contest results, the boy told Figueredo, "I'm not gonna win, Mr. Fig, I'm not gonna win."

And the principal said, "Don't worry about it, you're a winner already for coming up here." The student's poster, which warned children about drugs, was the winner. "He was so proud," Figueredo said.

First grade teacher Anita Palmeri, who has been at Lincoln since 1989, agreed that community service learning's value can reach far beyond the academics. "[The students] will see that community service can open doors for them, even if it's only to create a desire in their hearts and the knowledge that there are other things out there for them," she said, referring to the networking done in many service projects that can forge long-term relationships and lead to jobs later.

For school systems looking to mirror Lincoln's example, there is one challenge: The practice of weaving service projects into the daily life of the school is so second-nature that there is no formal policy or step-by-step training guide to go by (although the school system does have a K-8 community-service-learning curriculum that Pieczarka helped write). People at Lincoln have simply committed to making service part of the life of the school and integrating it into the educational process.

"We don't say everybody on the staff has to do a community-service-learning project. We encourage it, and say everybody should try to do something. They'll go to someone on the staff, to someone with the experience who will suggest ideas. And then they'll do it," said Figueredo

of the informal way Lincoln's community-service-learning lifestyle is passed on to new teachers.

Pieczarka agreed that the school's culture of citizenship, caring, and community can only survive by its own hands. "I think it's important that we, as teachers, keep telling others who are doing it, 'You're helping other people, and kids are learning. That's the value.'"