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Students with Special Needs Prove They Can Serve Too

Despite tremendous strides and the increasing popularity of inclusive educational practice, there are still many people who believe that students with special needs are best suited as recipients of service, not performers of service. But in South Brunswick, New Jersey, middle school teacher Matthew Jennings has compiled four years of experience to prove otherwise.

When Mr. Jennings came to teach special education at the Crossroads Middle School four years ago, none of the school's 1,000 students — special education or regular education — were involved in service learning. But he was convinced that putting his students in the role of server, not "servee", was critical to building their self-esteem and engaging them in their own learning.

"Young people cannot build self-esteem if they are always on the receiving-end of service," says Mr. Jennings. "Of course, these students do need assistance, but I

"Young people cannot build self-esteem if they are always on the receiving-end of service."

Matthew Jennings, Teacher

think if they are really going to feel good about themselves, they have to be in the position of giving sometimes."

And give they have. In just four years, Mr. Jennings has led his students in a

number of highly innovative service learning projects. His reading students spend ten weeks each year on a literacy project, visiting a local elementary school, reading to kindergarten students and helping the youngsters complete a series of book projects. Each week, they stress a new reading skill with their young students and throughout the project they keep their own portfolios for assessment.

Mr. Jennings' English students are also involved in an intergenerational service *continued on page 6*

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chance to take part in quality service learning programs in the years to come. For this to happen, we will need to reach out to educators throughout the country and demonstrate to them that the National Helpers Network is ready to serve as a working partner in helping them to create and launch their service learning efforts. Whether it be through our library of program guides and curricula, our on-site training workshops or through our individualized program consultations, the Network can be a vital resource to these professionals. But it will be up to us to find the people who can really make service learning happen on a local level.

I look forward to working with the staff and board of this organization to broaden and strengthen this network by expanding our reach, initiating innovative applications for service learning, and increasing awareness of service learning as a viable, valuable and effective educational practice. As a long-term goal, I hope that we can facilitate the total integration of service learning into the core curriculum. We can start by addressing the area of teacher training. I believe that schools of education need to offer service learning as a required course. It will be incumbent upon me as the new president to find those schools, forge new partnerships and build these relationships.

I know I face many challenges, but I am not intimidated. In fact, I am energized by my belief in the power of service learning, my confidence in this organization, and, most of all, by the promise I see in my daughter and young people just like her as they make the transition from child to adult.

Deidre C. Meyerson, President

Students with Special Needs

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project in which they teach local senior citizens how to use word processing software, then collaborate with seniors to write stories and articles on the computer. For a math class, Mr. Jennings' students mastered the concepts of area and perimeter by restoring a neglected garden on the school grounds — a garden that had been established years ago as a memorial to a teacher. After the students restored the garden, they invited the teacher's wife for a dedication ceremony.

Currently, Mr. Jennings' students are working with local seniors on a quilting project. Together, the students and seniors are designing and sewing the quilts, which will then be donated to needy babies. "Every year our service learning program develops into something else," says Mr. Jennings. "Now some of our ideas are spreading outside the special education program to other parts of the school."

Even Mr. Jennings admits that he had some reservations about pushing his students too hard at first. "I worried about whether they would be able to do it," says Mr. Jennings, whose 7th and 8th grade students are classified as neurologically impaired, perceptually impaired and emotionally disturbed and fall anywhere

between 2nd grade and 8th grade in terms of developmental ability. "But I find that kids live up to the expectations you set for them."

Mr. Jennings also believes his students are learning the curriculum content better as his service learning projects give students a chance to engage in hands-on learning and see the connections between the curriculum and the real world. "One of the great things about service learning is that by its very nature, it really requires cooperative learning and multiple intelligence and all of those other elements of educational reform," he says.

But his students also seem more motivated to learn, he says. For example, as a culminating project for the intergenerational computer project, students had to plan an ice cream sundae party for the seniors. Students made certificates for the seniors and created menus for the party, developing descriptions of the different offerings and using their computer skills to develop the menus. "Some of the work I received was just fantastic," says Mr. Jennings. "It was far above what I might have gotten if I simply had given them the assignment without the central purpose or audience."

The same is true of the literacy work his students are doing with young children, says Mr. Jennings. "I can get 8th graders to read picture books, which might be the right ability level, but if I were to hand it to them to read, they would think I was insulting them. Somehow, because they are doing it with kids and they have an authentic purpose, it's okay."

There are some things Mr. Jennings says he does differently than he might if he were working with other students. For example, he prefers to have the whole class working together at one site and he does not send students off to any site unsupervised. The level of structure also has to be very high, he says, especially in the area of training and delegating responsibility. "Kids need to be very clear on what will be expected of them," says Mr. Jennings. "The more preparation — and the fewer assumptions about prior knowledge — the better."

Reflection is another area where Mr. Jennings has had to pay special attention. While many service learning programs rely on journals for much of their reflection, journals are a struggle for his students because of their resistance to any kind of writing. Varying reflection activities, by including role

playing, structured discussion and sensitivity activities, has been a real success, says Jennings.

"We had one group of students who couldn't understand why the older people were having trouble using the mouse," he says. "So we had them put their hands in ice water for 30 seconds and then try using the mouse themselves to give them a sense of what stiff joints would feel like."

Over the years, Mr. Jennings says there have been some students he was afraid might not be up to the challenge of service learning, but he has found that it is always best to give every student the opportunity, and then make adjustments if necessary. "Some of the kids I've been the most concerned about have done the best jobs. They never would have gotten that opportunity if I had said to them, 'No, I just don't think you can do this.'"

And that, says Mr. Jennings, is really the whole point of engaging his students in service learning. "We put these students in the unusual position of giving and, as a result, they are looked upon very differently. Now they are looked upon for what they have, not what they don't have." ●