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# The Blossoming of Service Learning Quality in Maryland or "How do we know it's getting any better?!"

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Luke F. Frazier

## The Blossoming of Service Learning Quality in Maryland or "How do we know it's getting any better?!"

It's almost 9:20 on a February morning and the parking lot at Edmondson-Westside High School is mostly quiet. Only a faint thump-thump-thump of the latest urban anthem wafts from a Nissan Sentra double-parked at the entrance. The sky threatens rain as our visiting group of Chicago educators steps from the van and hurries inside. The Chicagoans are here to examine urban service learning in all its glory. And although we have carefully selected sites for our visitors based on their reputations, I am still nervous. Nervous about the quality of what they will see. Nervous that the students won't really be articulate. Nervous that the service learning activity will be soft and not rigorous. Nervous.

The hallways at Edmondson-Westside are clean, old, and dim. The size of the physical plant makes the school one of those where you envision yourself getting lost and not finding the office for an hour. But in classroom after classroom, students, almost all black, are engaged in quiet discussion or study. It looks like learning really happens here. We make our way to the science classroom of Ms. Bessina Williams. Sitting in a kind of separate study area with a large table are five sulking teenagers. I assume these are the presenters, and I start worrying anew. Ms. Williams, a representative of an environmental advocacy group, and another Edmondson teacher take us through an excellent analysis of their service-learning efforts and why they matter to their teaching. They make persuasive arguments for service-learning methods and why they deliver the goods to all kinds of students. When they finish I can tell that the visitors are impressed. Now comes the moment of truth.

When the gang of five stands before us the look on their faces says, "I'd rather be anywhere else." Ms. Williams starts them off with a couple of leading questions. Then the magic begins. The three young women and two young men, decked out in the urban fashion

of oversize tee shirts and baggy coats, slowly warm to the stories they hold in their heads and hearts about their service-learning experiences. They talk about the learning styles of the younger students and the science concepts involved in their outdoor tutoring. They talk about the challenge of making information interesting to their young charges and the kinds of things they had to learn first in order to be able to teach it. And perhaps most amazing of all, they articulate the benefits of studying environmental science through service learning and the differences they made in their community as a result. All the adults seem pleasantly stunned. After a spirited question and answer session, our mission is accomplished. We have seen high quality service learning in action. We have seen students who have given something to their community and earned a big dose of science knowledge in the process.

The story of Edmondson-Westside offered above is certainly not unique. With the new emphasis on quality service learning that includes significant attention to meeting community needs and making sure that learning is accomplished, the teachers and students and administrators involved across the state are understanding

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that quality matters. In short, they are getting it. They are getting it in Frederick, where students, community businesses, and nonprofit agencies combat fatal childhood diseases at the same time middle schoolers learn and understand math. They are getting it in Baltimore County, where students at Loch Raven High partner with Action for the Homeless to both understand suburban homelessness and do a variety of things to fight it. They get it in Anne Arundel County, where South River High and Old Mill Middle jointly design and build accessible play areas for disabled students attending Central Special School. They get it in St. Mary's County, where students work alongside community members to renovate housing and expand upon what they learn in social studies. And they get it in Wicomico County, where middle school students restore a stream and then write about their experiences as a part of their English curriculum. But the individual projects are only one aspect of the greater quality service learning that is emerging everywhere in Maryland. Two other aspects of the equation are the ways that Maryland Student Service Alliance (MSSA)/Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) collaborates with school systems and guides them to the places where quality service learning lives; and the systemic changes school systems have made that make quality service learning more likely to happen.

MSSA/MSDE now visits schools and observes service learning exclusively through the prism of Maryland's Best Practices for Classroom Service Learning. We no longer provide just general feedback but return written comments to the teachers and principals with a point by point discussion about how the project was strong, where it met the Best Practices

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*We no longer provide just general feedback but return written comments to the teachers and principals with a point by point discussion about how the project was strong, where it met the Best Practices and where it did not.*

and where it did not. How can we expect teachers and administrators to improve if they are not given consistent and clear feedback? In the past the emphasis, quite candidly, was to get teachers to do something. Now that doesn't cut it. We put forth the Best Practices at every opportunity and remind people that

there are standards by which to develop and implement service learning. It gives everyone involved a way to both measure where they are right now and how they can improve the areas where they still fall short. We have a similar guide for the Best Practices for administrators. The important point here is that MSSA/MSDE is making sure that teachers and administrators know that quality service learning consists of some very specific things and very specific ways of conducting service activities. There are no excuses for poor quality when high quality is obvious.

There are numerous examples of the kinds of school system efforts that are increasing service learning quality in Maryland. These include action steps taken to:

- Require school-based service learning coordinators and guidance counselors to meet together
- Conduct system assessments that gather teachers, students, community reps, administrators, etc., together to analyze their program and plan improvements
- Hold recognition events to publicize quality service and students
- Combine Higher Ed faculty with secondary teachers for training on seven Best Practices
- Link ALL service learning to Essential Curriculum
- Link high schools w/feeder schools for system-wide service learning projects
- Partner with community agency to create a special class for disruptive students who then take part in quality service learning

In conclusion, the blossoming of service learning quality in Maryland is found in many places . . . the individual projects cited above, the specific improvements made by school systems in terms of the structure and process of their service learning education, and the articulation of students who have discovered a fertile place to learn and grow. One further source of informed opinion about service learning quality is the more than seventy expert teachers known as Fellows. In the past, Fellows were the first to strongly criticize service learning that wasn't very good. Now many Fellows report that their teaching colleagues who had just "gone through the motions" vis à vis service learning now make real efforts to achieve quality results.

Service learning quality in Maryland isn't finished growing. But the arching branches that hold the fruit of quality service learning in schools across Maryland are part of a tree whose roots continue to deepen.