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Building Character, Trust, and Leadership: Service Learning Offers Positive Pathways to Adulthood

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BUILDING CHARACTER, TRUST, AND LEADERSHIP

Service Learning Offers Positive Pathways to Adulthood

Ebony Sandusky admits it was sheer peer pressure that initially led her to participate in her school's service learning programs. Now, she says, "community service is in my blood." Sandusky, a senior at Romulus High School in Romulus, Mich., has worked on a myriad of service projects throughout her high school years. She helped organize educational symposiums on such topics as domestic violence and multiculturalism and, most recently, led the effort to provide education about safe sex to a community concerned about the growing number of teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. "When I see something that needs changing, I go after it with a vengeance," says Sandusky.

Still, Sandusky recalls that she wasn't always so confident in her ability to "make change." She credits service learning with giving her the leadership skills she needs to be a positive force in her community. "Service learning helps define who you are. I've become more mature, and I'm more apt to speak my mind," she says.

Sandusky's testament to service learning is echoed by educators who believe that when community service is linked to specific educational objectives, students see how what they learn in school can be applied to benefit their communities. At the same time, experts say, students learn what it means to be citizens in a democratic society.

Effective service learning programs help students understand they have responsibilities to the communities in which they live, says Denise Walker, program developer at the Michigan K-12 Service Learning Center. And when students can answer a *true* need in their communities, the lessons can be as memorable as they are rewarding, she contends: "Compare studying geometry from a textbook in class to actually working in a park and using geometric knowledge to build a picnic table that community members use," for example.

When students see how using what they know benefits others, service learning delivers on its promise to help build democratic citizens. "People think of democracy as something you learn in government class," Walker observes. "But being involved is an activity, not a doctrine. Service learning helps students realize that they are part of a society and have a voice in their community."

Students also begin to see the community as a "font of knowledge" and learn how to learn outside the classroom, adds Stella Raudenbush, executive director of the Michigan center. "Service learning blurs the line between community and school," she says. Students involved in service learning projects learn to value "community wisdom" and to respect the "variety and diversity of their communities," Raudenbush maintains.

Thomas Dolan agrees. When he was principal at Romulus

High School, he was concerned about the “sterility of the high school experience” and a curriculum that didn’t always challenge students to use higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills. Believing that service learning could add authenticity to students’ school experiences, Dolan used grant money to explore how community service could be integrated into the language arts and social studies curriculums. What resulted was a model of service learning that the Romulus public schools would implement.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was a big issue when Romulus students first experimented with service learning, explains

Dolan, now the district’s curriculum director. “Students wanted to see how the treaty would affect the regional economy, so they worked for six months gathering information and writing reports.” Students then examined the implications of NAFTA on the regional economy in a day-long symposium staged for school district personnel and other interested community members.

“Engaging students in an academic performance is just as important as having students publicly perform in sports or music,” Dolan believes. And by providing information and analysis, students contribute to community members’ understanding of issues that affect their livelihood.

A chance to organize educational symposiums is just one of the many service learning opportunities extended to students in Romulus. “The service learning component is evolving,” says Dolan. “We’re now trying to integrate service into more of the curriculum.”

Kathy Hurst is the service learning coordinator in Romulus. It’s her job to meet with teachers in the district to determine how to weave service learning into their lessons. “It’s important for teachers to see how service learning can meet course objectives,” she says. “It’s also important that students not see service learning as an add-on activity” but as an integral part of their education.

Hurst maintains that almost every learning objective can be coupled with a community service project. If a goal is for elementary students to learn about the growth process of plants, for example, students could adopt a tree, plant it, and watch it grow, while discussing the root systems, the growth, the leaves, throughout the year. This activity is also a service, Walker explains, because “plant-



ing trees beautifies the community.” If high school students are studying how pollutants are introduced into river systems, they can visit the local Rouge River and take water samples, Hurst suggests. Data about those samples can then be sent, via the Internet, to the Environmental Protection Agency for analysis.

Hurst, who was raised in Romulus, says her goal is to incorporate a service learning component into every course at every grade level in her district. This goal is important, she says, because through service learning “students no longer see school as an isolated place. They recognize that they are part of a much larger picture and that it’s important for them to help make Romulus a community to be proud of.”

Rebecca Oleszkowicz, a junior at Romulus High School, has taken this obligation to heart. Being involved in service learning projects “makes me feel good about the community I live in and has given me the self-confidence to do what I can to make sure this community thrives,” she says. Oleszkowicz recently organized a spaghetti dinner that raised \$2,000 for a child’s bone marrow transplant. “Seeing the amount on that check and knowing that it will help this little girl get a life-saving operation—well, it makes you feel like you can do anything,” she observes.

Such experiences offer positive paths to adulthood for students, says Raudenbush, who laments the absence of public life involvement in too many young people’s lives. Through service learning, she maintains, “every student learns how to be a citizen in this country and understands what it takes to be a person.” ●

—KATHY CHECKLEY