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"Leave School and Learn": Seekonk High School's Independent Study Program

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Change comes slowly to education. Schools are bound by tradition and a high school curriculum often remains constant. There are many reasons for a curriculum not changing, including meeting the course pre-requisites for college admission. Often, however, there is a resistance to change. As a result, many students take the same courses as their parents took when in school.

The idea for a community volunteer program for students surfaced in the early 1970s at Seekonk High School. Many students seemed bored with school and were looking for an alternate way of learning. They wanted to be doing something that was different. They wanted courses that would have relevance to real life and maybe even be exciting.

A plan was developed at Seekonk High School to create a course which would allow students to leave school on a regular basis and volunteer within the community. The course would be open to seniors and would be known as the Independent Study Program. The primary mission of Independent Study is to allow students to experience the excitement, involvement, and personal growth of volunteerism. The underlying philosophy is the belief that people learn by doing. The community serves as a classroom, as seniors will be given academic credit for their participation at a variety of community agencies. The biggest stumbling block in having the Independent Study program initially adopted into the curriculum was the unwillingness to change. It is ironic, but this author had arranged to have Dr. Dwight Allen, then Dean of the University of Massachusetts School of Education, speak at an open parent forum about the status of education. The title of his talk was "It is Easier to Move a Cemetery than to Change a School." He spoke about education's need for change and the need to take risks. One month later, the Independent Study Program was officially adopted into the curriculum at Seekonk High School.

The program would never have begun if there had not been the support of the high school administration. Fortunately for Seekonk High School, there was a forward-

thinking principal, Richard L. Dias, who gave the support needed to get things started. Years later, the program is still going strong. It has finally become an accepted course for students to elect and enjoy. The school walls have been broken down. Learning occurs outside the classroom. And yes, students can be trusted and are responsible. Change is not easy, but it can happen.

INDEPENDENT STUDY PROGRAM

The Independent Study Program believes students can learn by leaving school and volunteering in the community. The program helps people explore the world as they choose. A contract of trust between teacher and student is established where the student is free to choose what he or she will learn, and when, how, and with how much and what kind of help. The learning experience in which a student participates depends on his or her individual motives, initiative, and interests. There are no limits for learning. The role of the teacher in this program is not to tell other people what they must learn, nor is it to say that some people are more able and worthy than others. The community outside of school is used as a place to learn as students leave the confines of the high school to volunteer their services and energies to various organizations, some of which are committed to social change and improvement.

The Independent Study Program is experiential learning. It has a quality of personal involvement as the whole person is involved in a learning event which encompasses both the affective and cognitive domains. It is self-initiated even when the impetus or stimulus comes from the outside; the sense of discovery, of reaching out, of comprehending comes from within. It makes a difference in the behavior, the attitudes, and maybe even the personality of the learner. The learner evaluates his or her own work. They know whether it is meeting their needs, whether it leads toward what they want to know, whether it illuminates their ignorance. Evaluation occurs within the learner. Its essence is personal meaning-

When such learning occurs, the element of the learner is built into the whole experience.

Students will discover they have a responsibility for their own learning as they become more of a participant in the group learning process. Students will either pass or fail and receive five academic credits for their successful participation.

Format

Seniors decide where and when they want to volunteer. Once this decision has been made, students submit an application for acceptance into the program. Students are asked to describe the nature of their involvement, plans for participation, and reasons why they chose their project. Students' willingness to volunteer is the key for acceptance.

This application is followed by the signing of a contract. The contract states "The Independent Study Program is a privilege and is not to be misused." The program involves a position of trust between students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Students are responsible for all schoolwork missed while volunteering. The contract is in force as long as the trust is not broken.

The contract provides specific information about the agency where volunteering is to occur, the agency contact person, specifics concerning the times when a student will leave and return to school, and signatures from students and parents. Released time from school is permitted for this volunteering. There are no tests, and grades are determined on a pass/fail basis.

The program was developed and is administrated by Dr. Justus D. Anderson at Seekonk High School. He attempts to match student and agency needs to insure maximum personal growth.

Student volunteers receive supervision and evaluation for their efforts. Whenever possible, all students initially meet with the volunteer supervisor of the agency where volunteering will take place. In addition to evaluations from supervisors, students also evaluate their own involvement. They measure their successes, failures, feelings, and personal growth. Of the 65 students who participated in the most recent Independent Study Program, 91% rated their experiences as outstanding.

Students are required to obtain a job description and have an interview at any agency where they are considering to be a volunteer. Students are given an orientation session both at Seekonk High School and at the agency. Students are presented with information about their obligations, commitments, and duties. There has to be a sincere attempt to have open communication with all parties to insure a positive experience. All volunteers are reviewed in their performance. Agency supervisors

monitor students' progress and provide recommendations to the high school coordinator and the students.

Assessments

A recent evaluation of the program in a follow-up study of Seekonk graduates revealed that the Independent Study Program received the highest rating of any Seekonk course. These former students were asked to evaluate a variety of courses in the high school. Following are the results for the Independent Study Program. Graduates rated their programs excellent, 64%, good, 33%, and fair, 3%. Students were asked to comment on their involvement. Some of the most recent remarks were:

I learned a lot about myself and enjoyed my experiences.

I was pleased to help small children. I learned a great deal about myself and the meaning of patience.

I have learned that I can be a help to young people. They have taught me to feel good about myself.

I have become more independent by being on my own at the hospital.

I am excited about my experience. It has given me the incentive to go on to college.

I look at the kids I am working with and my problems are nothing. I never realized how lucky I am.

I have really enjoyed the work at the fire station. I have applied to become a volunteer fire fighter.

This experience will be helpful in deciding which area in the health field I will major in.

The I.S. program has been valuable to me because it allowed me to observe the management and procedures needed to maintain a successful advertising company.

Working with people gives me a sense of responsibility and importance. People look up to me and that makes me feel good.

I am so glad I participated in the I.S. program. I feel needed and always leave with a smile on my face.

This experience has proved to me that I am able to think for myself and from that, learn by myself.

Students are urged to keep a daily journal of their volunteer experiences. The log is based upon personal feelings. An attempt is made to have students look into themselves, their values, and their beliefs.

Near the end of the school year, an all-day meeting brings all Independent Study students together where they share their experiences, feelings, joys, and sorrows. Students are asked to discuss what they learned about themselves and how the volunteer experiences made them feel. This is a time for reflection, sharing and insights.

An example of reflection follows. It is a description of one student's, Jennifer Rezendes, experience. It vividly tells about her feelings and thoughts concerning her volunteer experience with young cancer patients at Rhode Island Hospital. This example describes her thoughts about the death of one of her clients:

I am afraid, I am nervous, I am scared. I am entering the funeral home for a wake. I am going to view the body of my six-year-old friend, . . . who died from cancer. I worked with him during my involvement at the hospital. What do I say? What do I do? I slowly approach the little white casket. My palms are sweating. My eyes are hurting. People look numb, afraid, and hurt. I find myself crying. I slowly reach into the casket and touch my friend's hand. It is cold and I know he is no longer with us. I get to my car and begin to cry uncontrollably. I am glad I can cry. I know it is all right. I have lost a wonderful friend. I have learned so much. I know I have so much to look forward to. I know the joy of giving to others, the joy of crying about other people. I am beginning to know the joy of life and that I must appreciate each day. I have become more positive and more caring. I know the value of helping others. I am grateful for knowing . . . and the gift this program has given me to grow.

Rezendes, along with Seekonk graduates Lori-Ann Lima and Vicky Curran, reflected upon their volunteer experiences while speaking this past November at the New England Conference on Community Service Learning in Worcester. Lima said, "I really loved working with children during my volunteering with autistic children. It was challenging, yet enjoyable. The joy of working with and helping others thrills me. When I volunteered at Bradley Hospital in East Providence, Rhode Island, I felt alive, important, and needed." Curran volunteered at a law office, working with clients and lawyers in a variety of activities: "I always thought I wanted to be a lawyer until I began volunteering. The experience made me look at what I really wanted to do with my life. Volunteering was a positive thing for me. I now know I don't want to be a lawyer. I think I want to work with people in a more helping capacity."

The power of reflection for these three students shows the growth and impact of volunteering. Reflection can serve as a positive tool to have students look at themselves, while listening to the reflections of others. Students learn that it is all right to have feelings. The feelings of joy, sorrow, happiness, and pain become natural and students soon learn they are not alone in having these feelings. The strength and drama of students having an honest dialogue are powerful.

Schools many times reward conformity. Teachers give out grades based upon a student's ability to recall or memorize a set of facts. When students are asked how they feel about something, they often don't know what to say. They respond the way they should feel rather than the way they do feel. They fear not doing what others expect.

Volunteering is a way of getting in touch with oneself. Students begin to live from the inside and not from the outside in. Students have a chance to see themselves and how they react in real life situations.

IMPLEMENTING CSL

The beginning stages of a community service program are extremely important. Ideally, the impetus for change will come from individuals who genuinely believe in the value of volunteerism. People have to buy into the positive results that can occur when this type of program is adopted into a school.

Every school is different. You must look at the personnel, politics, and mission of your school. It would be important to have a vision statement and list the potential benefits of community service in your school.

Your goals should be specific and realistic. You need to show how a program would work and how it would benefit students and the community. You must get the important and influential staff, student, and community members to support your plans for change. You will only be spinning your wheels if you don't have support. People must believe in what you are proposing.

Unfortunately, there are people in education who are resistant to change. These are the same people who have been teaching the same things in the same way for a number of years. Change threatens these people and they will often sit on the sidelines waiting to criticize anything that goes wrong. Your willingness to be creative and change threatens them. Obviously, these are the people we must deal with, but we must recognize that we have to move beyond their steadfast ways.

When we first started our program in Seekonk, teachers resented students missing their class to volunteer in the community. Even though students were responsible for all missed classroom assignments, some teachers were personally insulted when students left their classes.

One memorable instance involved two students who left school to work with severely retarded adolescents. These two students had good grades and genuinely believed in what they were doing. Every week, when they left their mathematics class to volunteer, the teacher would say, "Don't you think it is more important to be in my math class than to go work with those retards?" The students were incensed and filled with rage at this teacher's insensitive and ignorant remarks. It didn't stop them, however, as they continued to leave school each week to volunteer.

Near the end of their community service project, they brought three of their retarded clients to our school. It was a joyous day for everyone, as students openly embraced these visitors. The visitors ultimately attended the math class of the resistant teacher. The teacher was in

shock when he saw these people enter his classroom. He was nervous, speechless, and embarrassed. From that day on, he never asked why the students were leaving his class. Humility may have entered this teacher's life.

Organizational Issues

There are certain organizational issues that must be addressed. A determination must be made who will administer the program. A job description, with listed responsibilities, seems necessary. A decision must be made if a volunteer program is to be a part of the curriculum or extra-curricular. When a program is a part of the curriculum, it gives credibility and value to volunteering. If it is worthwhile, make it important.

Another decision to make is whether the program should be voluntary or required. Voluntary programs work better, because a student who wants to be involved will join. Making volunteering mandatory is a contradiction of terms. Mandatory volunteering for everyone sounds wonderful, but is not realistic. It is often done for the wrong reasons. Sometimes, it is even done to make a school system look good.

Will community service be given academic credit? If it is a part of the curriculum, credit should be given to students for their efforts. To avoid the potential controversy surrounding the actual grade a student will receive, a pass/fail system is practical.

There is a usual sense of excitement and enthusiasm surrounding the start of a new program. These ingredients, although useful, must be kept in perspective. It is important to start small. Begin with a program that is manageable and will work. Remember, there are some people who will want to see us fail. Initially, select the students who can be trusted to be responsible in meeting their obligations. There will always be a risk with some students. You want the program to be successful, so try to choose students carefully. Your risk taking can be extended once you get the program started.

Try to get input from other schools who run successful programs. Find out what they do that works. Make contact with agencies that accept volunteers. Find out what their needs are and how you can coordinate volunteering with them.

Find people in your school and community who will take some ownership for creating a community service program. You want involvement and support to get things started. Support must come from many directions. You have to have administrative approval to proceed effectively. Administrative backing has to occur.

Once administration support is obtained you will need support of students, faculty, and parents. An advisory board for a community service program should be established and maintained. Select students, staff, and community members who are excited and helpful in

beginning and maintaining a program. It helps to have people with clout on an advisory board who are forces for change.

Sustaining CSL

A community service learning program is an ongoing process. It will undoubtedly expand and must be properly maintained to insure continued success. New agencies must be found and solicited for student volunteers. Students should be encouraged to find their own placements and go where the rewards will be the greatest for them. Student input and decision making in placement is vital.

Seekonk is a small suburban town in Massachusetts. We are 10 miles from Providence, Rhode Island and 45 miles from Boston. Some of our best placements have taken place when students traveled the extra distance to get a placement that had meaning to them.

One recent graduate, David Rochefort, decided he wanted to volunteer at the American Civil Liberties Union office in Boston. David would leave his home at 6:00 A.M., catch a train to Boston, volunteer, and get back home at 7:00 P.M. David said it was the most exciting day of his week. He was dealing with real people with real problems. It opened his eyes to life as it exists outside the secure walls of Seekonk High School. The logistics of getting to Boston did not seem important because he was doing something to help other people.

Recruitment of new students into the program can best be accomplished by having student volunteers talk with students eligible to take a community service learning course. Students will identify with the enthusiasm they see in other students. They will want to become a part of a course that deals with the real world.

Students volunteers can also speak at faculty and parent meetings. This will give everyone a chance to listen and learn what occurs when students leave school to volunteer. People will often support an activity when they know what it is all about.

It is strongly suggested that a newsletter be written and distributed which will highlight student activities and involvement in volunteering. Vivid descriptions of student participation and the personal insights that develop all make for interesting reading.

Press releases to newspapers are also a valuable source of a public relations effort. It pays to advertise the many good things that occur from volunteering. Let people know what is happening. A video production of a volunteer program works well. We have had students produce videos which depict what students do at volunteer sites. People are very receptive to using and watching videos. They have been shown at parent and civic meetings with a positive response.

Celebration and Recognition

There is a definite need and place for recognition of student volunteer achievement. Students have freely given their time and energy to work with others. They deserve positive stroking for their commitment.

Seekonk holds an annual Independent Study workshop and celebration for seniors who participated in the community service program. During this day, a variety of activities allows students to reflect and share in the many experiences they had in their individual projects. Students openly describe their experiences and the personal feelings that accompanied them. It is a time of sharing and honest dialogue.

Congratulatory remarks are extended to the students from community leaders. Seekonk is affiliated with the Thomas Jefferson Forum which serves as a network for schools to communicate openly and learn more about volunteering. The Forum has been an important force in organizing community service in Massachusetts. One year, Forum representative Patricia Barnicle presented T-shirts to the students for their contribution to community service and discussed the virtues of volunteerism.

Speakers are brought in to enhance the day's activities. The most outstanding speaker has been Susan Cook, who is confined to a wheelchair and is blind. She spoke with humor and zest about how she has risen above her physical limitations and the importance of having a positive attitude towards life. The student response to her talk was warm and enthusiastic.

The day is set aside to honor students for their service to the community. Messages of appreciation are ex-

tended from many of the agencies where Seekonk students worked. Students leave the experiences of the day knowing they are accepted and appreciated for giving to others. It is a day to celebrate and rejoice. Included in the recognition process has been the presentation of workshops at conferences. Seekonk has been fortunate to have been a workshop participant at two excellent conferences designed to challenge educators and community groups to form a partnership which supports education and community service.

CONCLUSION

Community service learning is here to stay. It will stay because it works. The rewards and benefits from volunteering are becoming known and accepted. Change is possible in education. There will always be resistance to changing the way things are, but it can be done. Schools should be exciting and creative places to be. Community service can help to bring this about.

For those educators who wonder if it is worth it, give it a try. You can always go back to the way things were. Instead, we can take a risk and make education come alive. Using the community as a resource to learn needs to be implemented and fostered. Try it! It works!

Dr. Jay D. Anderson is the Human Development Program Coordinator at Seekonk High School in Seekonk, Massachusetts.

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