

# Gifted Students Serving Their Community

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## WHAT IS SERVICE LEARNING?

Service learning engages students in solving real life problems. The teacher serves as the facilitator, guiding students through the process. Solving a real community problem is the key to success. The community becomes the classroom.

Service learning is best when student driven. They may find problems the community is facing from interviews with community leaders, parents, and teachers. Student motivation increases when they select the project topic. Students write the questions and take notes during the interview. It is best if they lead the interview.

When selecting the project, use these types of questions to help narrow to the best choice. Which project would have the greatest impact on our community? Which project would affect the most people? Which project would be realistic in accomplishing? Which project could we complete within our time frame?

Reflections by students are a key feature in service projects. This element helps them to realize they are gaining academic and personal skills. It guides them as they progress in the project and helps to determine where changes are needed.

Reflections are completed regularly throughout the project. They may be written or answered in discussion.

- The best part of the project was ...
- I am surprised that ...
- From this project I appreciate ...
- What have you learned about yourself from this project?
- How can I make use of what I have learned about myself in another way?
- How are you gaining a broader view of our community?
- What are you learning that connects with your other classes?

- How did you help today? How would you rate your help?
- What could have been done better today?

Feedback is critical. This may be from one student to another student. It may be from the teacher to the student. It may be from another person involved in the project to the student. Written or oral feedback needs to be timely, as it will have more of an impact. It also needs to be specific. They need to know what they did that was good or what to change. Feedback is helpful for motivation. Examples may include:

- I like how you accurately read the dial.
- You were looking directly at the resident while speaking.
- You followed the mentor's directions.
- Your kind words brought smiles to the others involved.
- You followed the safety procedures.

Brainstorming can be used in generating solutions to problems. It is fun for students and will bring a vast array of ideas if you follow these guidelines. Every idea is welcome. Every idea is recorded, even if it sounds crazy or useless. Aim for as many ideas as you can. Off the wall ideas are welcome. Spin-off ideas from others are welcome. Students will then critique their ideas and determine what solution would be the best.

The real value of teamwork is brought to life. Writing group teamwork goals and self-monitoring can help keep them focused. Timelines help to keep students on track so deadlines are met.

Service learning is a positive way to integrate curriculum across disciplines. While you are leading students in character development they are expanding core curriculum strengths. Specific goals are tied to the standards and benchmarks in your curriculum.

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*Leone Junck* has taught school for twenty-six years. For the past fifteen years she has instructed gifted students in grades K-8. Her special areas of interest are service learning, future problem solving and brain research as it applies to the classroom.

## BACKGROUND

Ogden Middle School students in the Extended Learning Program have completed successful service projects. The projects have been student led, while the teacher served as the facilitator. Students selected the projects based on community needs, carried out their plans, and evaluated their progress along the way. The classes met once a week during the school year.

Six sixth graders choose a project with a local nursing home called the Manor. They visited twice a month carrying out activities they planned in advance. Each student had one or two "buddies" in the nursing home.

Before going to the Manor the students interviewed the Activity Director to learn about the likes and abilities of the residents, and engaged in role playing activities to help them prepare for situations that might arise. They planned and organized activities in advance and took needed supplies with them.

Planned activities included:

A beanbag toss game that provided physical exercise for residents in wheel chairs by encouraging arm stretching and bag gripping movements. Residents enjoyed cheering on their friends.

Go Fish, and other card games were good small group activities and students enjoyed teaching residents new games.

Painting with watercolors encouraged conversation as each student worked with a buddy to create a picture.

Craft projects allowed students and residents to work together on a planned project such as a spring egg tree. Students brought blown out eggs and working the residents they decorated the eggs with curly ribbons and sequins to make a dining room decoration.

Talent shows allowed students to share their skills in music with instrument playing and singing. Other students choose to share a poem they had memorized. Students were free to select what they wanted to share and residents enjoyed the performances.

**Reflections were required after each Manor visit. Journal style entries were written. I wrote feedback based on their writings and parents were given the opportunity to respond to their child's entries.**

Reflections were required after each Manor visit. Journal style entries were written. I wrote feedback based on their writings and parents were given the opportunity to respond in writing to their child's entries.

Guided group discussions were also part of the evaluation process. Time spent in critiquing helped improve the following visits. Feedback during this time is important for success and student growth.

Students will share more in writing than in class orally. Students wrote, "because of this project I am:

- more understanding of their problems
- kinder to older people
- more patient around older people
- better at communicating with people
- beginning to feel better about myself."

Eight fifth graders were interested in a science project. They had enjoyed classroom science experiments the year before and wanted to do more, as well as take field trips. They choose to do water reading for the Harrier Marsh wetlands outside of town. The readings were e-mailed to Iowater, and were the first reading received from Boone County. The Department of Natural Resources does not have the manpower or funding to gather reading from all lakes, streams and wetlands around the state. Yet such readings help to determine trends and identify problems.

Service learning provides integration into curriculum areas. The students learned about environmental science as it relates to our community while they studied Harrier Marsh. They learned about accuracy in collecting data. Learners had the opportunity to record data and chart information. They compared the first and second readings. Dissolved oxygen, pH, nitrite, nitrate, phosphate and water temperatures were recorded and studied.

Communication skills were gained as they presented their research, Wetland Minutes, aired over KWBG Radio. Researching skills began by writing questions on information

they would like to learn about wetlands. Note-taking skills followed. Tips for successful radio segments were learned. Practice along with timing was necessary. When students know they will share the research with an audience it raises the quality of information.

Career possibilities were an added bonus as we worked with our county naturalist and the Boone Radio Station.

Reflections included class discussion and journal entries. I wrote feedback responses to correlate with what the students had stated.

After visiting the wetland they wrote descriptive, compare and contrast, cause and effect sentences for aid in developing understanding.

Students wrote the following comments about how the project had helped them:

- "When giving a report in another class I will now know how to put the information together."
- "We had to work together; I needed to listen to everyone."
- "Kids can do beneficial community projects, just like adults."
- "By having told others what we have done, it might inspire others to help in their community."

## RESEARCH METHOD

Both projects were evaluated using a parent and student survey.

### 1. The parent survey

*The evaluation of a service project shows ranges of growth. Please indicate on the grid the response to each question as it relates to your child and the class project. You may wish to visit with your child as you complete the survey. Let 5 represent the highest score, while 1 is the lowest.*

Each question included this grid:

- before September 1, 2002  
1\_\_ 2\_\_ 3\_\_ 4\_\_ 5\_\_
- after March 25, 2003  
1\_\_ 2\_\_ 3\_\_ 4\_\_ 5\_\_

Goals of the Manor Project included: communication, teamwork, planning and rela-

tionship skills. The survey questions were written to match the goals.

Goals of the wetland project included: environmental science, water testing, communication, and teamwork. The survey questions were written to match the goals.

### 2. The student survey

*The evaluation of a service learning project shows ranges of growth. Please indicate on the grid the response to each question. Let 5 represent the highest score, while 1 is the lowest.*

The same grid was used for ranking the student survey.

## RESULTS

All parent and student surveys were returned from each project.

Service learning brings many benefits. Though each student may start at a different level, progress was achieved in every category. An added benefit to the survey was the guided conversation it brought between the student and parent.

Students in the Manor Project came to class with the attitude they could easily work in a team, this showed the least percentage of increase. They also came to class thinking their planning skills were high.

They were more at ease after they had experienced the project. The more at ease they were the more they would start a conversation.

They found journaling to be a valuable tool in learning about topics and themselves. Hopefully, this technique will carry over to other projects outside of this class.

By experiencing this project they have learned about the needs of another group of citizens. This is the key ingredient in a civic project—the needs of others.

They have learned about themselves while focusing on others.

Environmental science is a new topic for the fifth graders in the wetland project. This accounts for the high increase in growth. Radio broadcasting is also new for these students.

**TABLE 1:**  
**Findings from Parent Survey,  
Manor Mission Project**

Manor Mission Project, Parent Survey	Percentage of Increase
Growth observed in communication with older adults	25%
Growth observed in teamwork with peers	16.7%
Growth observed in planning skills with peers	16.7%
Growth observed in concern about issues that affect the elderly	25%
Growth observed in sensing what others are feeling, as it relates to the elderly	25%

**TABLE 2:**  
**Findings from Student Survey, Manor Mission**

Manor Mission, Student Survey Findings	Percentage of Increase
Growth made in starting a conversation with the Manor residents	41.7%
Growth made in understanding the needs of the Manor residents	37.5%
Growth made in learning about yourself	20.8%
Growth made in feeling at ease at the Manor	54.2%
Growth in understanding the value of journal reflections	41.7%
Growth in understanding the process of service learning	37.5%

**TABLE 3:**  
**Finding from Parent Survey, Wetland Task Force**

Wetland Task Force, Parent Survey	Percentage of Increase
Growth observed in the topic of environmental science	50%
Growth observed in the topic of water testing	62.5%
Growth observed in willingness to communicate information about the wetlands	56.2%
Growth observed in knowledge of radio broadcasting	59.4%
Growth observed in understanding they can make a positive difference to our community	59.4%

**TABLE 4:**  
**Findings from Student Survey, Wetland Task Force**

Wetland Task Force, Student Survey	Percentage of Increase
Growth made in understanding the importance of the wetland	65.6%
Growth made in ability to communicate on the radio	65.6%
Growth made in ability to work as a team	12.5%
Growth made in understanding the value of preparation	34.3%
Growth made in caring about our rural wetlands	56.2%
Growth made in understanding the process of service learning	40.6%

Students started class with confidence in their ability to work together.

Their scores reveal how surprised they were in their ability to help our community.

As students understand our community, hopefully, they will demonstrate care through civic responsibility. Hopefully, they will transfer the knowledge of the process to other projects.

## **BENEFITS BEYOND THE CLASSROOM —THE COMMUNITY WINS**

Residents of the Manor were the winners in the project. They gained socialization skills as they had the opportunity to interact with the students. Mental stimulation was observed as new activities were tried by a stroke resident.

The residents could keep track of the calendar days better, as they looked forward to the next visit. They were more open to try new activities as young people taught them. Everyone felt cared for as they had one-on-one attention.

Boone County citizens are winners, as people learn more about Harrier Marsh and the role it plays in our environment. Local residents gain knowledge about the health of the area and how all sections of the countryside depend on another.

Youth experiences last a lifetime. The service learning experiences they had will promote the desire to continue in their adult lives. As adults they will give more to their community because they were involved as youth. They will give of their time. As income allows when they are older they will give financial contributions as well. This is a winning combination for communities.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATORS

Service learning is most successful when:

- *A true community problem is addressed.* Volunteer managers may speak to students (in the classroom or at an agency) about the mission of the organization and the importance of the issues they are dealing with in the community. They can help students understand the connection between the service and the larger community issue.
- *Integrated across curriculum disciplines.* Volunteer managers should ask about all required school standards so they can help ensure that information is available for students. How does the service connect with reading, writing, math and science requirements? Educators may require specific activities, such as graphs, spreadsheet and charts as part of the math requirement.
- *Teamwork is effective.* Service projects are great opportunities for building teamwork and volunteer managers can build in short team building activities (games/exercises) and have student reflect on what they have learned so that when student do their written reflections they can talk about what they learned and experienced. Ask students how they will share responsibilities, listen to one another, and share ideas. Educators may ask students to write goals for how they will work together and encourage students to monitor their own progress.
- *Student driven.* Volunteer managers can help students identify problems and then determine what action to take and the steps needed to accomplish the task.

Encourage the students to create a timeline. The teacher/volunteer manager serves as a facilitator and offers guidance. Try to remember this is a total learning experience for students and not just a work activity. Help them develop the work you have into a learning project.

- *Evaluations are completed regularly.* At the closing of each planning or working sessions students should take a few minutes to analyze their progress. This would include the project, planning, and teamwork. Volunteer managers could help lead the discussions.
- *Using reflections.* The teacher will probably require reflections before, during and after the project is completed. This allows the students to monitor changes for progress. They have the opportunity to realize all they are learning about themselves and academic areas. Reflections may include: journaling, think-pair-share, guided discussion, pictures, videos, create songs, movie, slide show. Volunteer managers can work with teaches so that opportunities for reflections are scheduled for students.
- *Feedback is given.* Feedback should be given continually. Students gain motivation from knowing what was done correctly or what needs to be changed. Volunteer managers should give specific, focused comments during and at the end of every work session.
- *Mentors are available.* Experts in the topic the students are working on can be a great resource. Volunteer managers may enlist agency staff to talk to students about specific part of the project, to give current information and background knowledge to increase awareness of understanding of the issues. This may be an opportunity for them to learn about possible career choices.
- *Communicate with parents.* Volunteer managers can send letters to the parents that inform them of the goals and steps students are planning. Updates during the project may be sent. Informed parents are more supportive of projects.
- *Transportation is available.* Most projects require students to be driven to and from

the site. Volunteer managers would drive and help schedule pick-up times for efficiency.

- *Project is documented.* Digital pictures would allow students the opportunity to make short videos with relevant software. Volunteer managers would take pictures of the students during the stages of the project. You may assist students in preparing the digital movies. They are a great way for parents and community members to enjoy the project.
- *Celebrate success.* The sharing of accomplishments in the atmosphere of success will help to seal their learning. The volunteer manager may help arrange the fun celebrations with the teacher. Everyone in the project is included no matter how much or little they helped. They may have a party with games, and music, a peer sharing time, or share a video of the project with parents.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATORS: GO FOR IT!

- You may experience ambiguity in the beginning. You may not know where the project will lead, but with guidance the students will perform with positive results.
- Planning upfront will be a big payoff when activating the plan. Plan even the little details for positive results.
- You will like how motivated the students become. They display mature behavior while doing service projects, and their enthusiasm is catching.
- Curriculum standards incorporated into service make an ideal situation for fostering life-long citizenship.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Students learned about their community while working together. Student driven projects are more developed because they are based on true concern. Service learning is a powerful way to integrate curriculum with student achievement. Community groups that support students are vital in building character traits that promote positive citizenship.