

# At your service

## High schools turning real life into a classroom

By Peter Schworm, Globe Staff, 3/14/2004

**On this day, Millbury Jr./Sr. High School junior Kyle Dean turns in his English class essay to a substitute teacher of sorts, 77-year-old Rita Dobson. Dobson, a nursing home resident, peers at the finished product, a well-written, affectionate sketch of her life, and beams with approval. "He gets a star," she said. "It's a beautiful report."**

Dean and his classmates spent the last several weeks interviewing Dobson and other nursing home residents for a class project. They blended their academic coursework with volunteering, an approach known as service-learning and an increasingly popular trend in education. The idea behind it, teachers say, is that students learn more from combining studies with personal experience than from lectures and textbooks alone.

Volunteering helps skeptical students see the "real world" relevance of that perplexing algebra problem or that passage in their history book about World War II. It also engages their heart and their mind, educators say.

Public schools have traditionally had a civic mission, and many high school students must perform volunteer work to graduate. Such requirements have become more popular, educators say, out of concern for youngsters' political apathy and a renewed emphasis on community involvement after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Yet in an era of academic standards and high-stakes testing, schools are finding that volunteer work and academics work better in tandem. More are adopting service-learning practices, believing that exposing students to life outside of the classroom helps them academically.

"The field is growing in leaps and bounds," said Mary McCarthy, director of service-learning in the Hudson schools, considered a leader in the field. "It lets the student ask the questions, which is the way they learn best."

In Millbury, where volunteer projects are a part of many courses, students heard firsthand about life during the Depression and World War II, bringing those distant times to life. They chose what topics to explore, putting them in charge of what they learned. And as they made friends with the senior citizens, students said their assignment became more meaningful.

And their work improved, teachers said. The students' writing was crisper and more vivid. "They're invested in it," said Pat Haggerty, Millbury schools' service-learning coordinator. "That makes all the difference."

Nationally, the number of high schools that employed service-learning rose from 9 percent to 46 percent between 1984 and 1999, the last year such a survey was conducted, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Community service and service-learning are not the same. Community service is giving back to the community, but it is not necessarily connected to what students are doing in the school. Service-learning uses readings and reflection to link volunteering to the classroom.

For example, American history students at a Boston high school study the Revolutionary War by caring for a historic burial ground near their school, and Framingham High School students deliver food to the poor and elderly as they read authors such as Jonathan Kozol, who chronicles poverty in America.

That level of thinking makes service-learning about more than just good deeds, said Kenny Holdsman, managing director of the National Service-

Learning Partnership and former director of service-learning for Philadelphia's public schools.

There is a growing consensus that combining community service with coursework is the superior approach, said Alan Melchior, deputy director at the Center for Youth and Communities at Brandeis University. Without the backdrop of the classroom, "what the students are going to get out of it is very hit or miss," he said.

Yet with surveys indicating that 83 percent of high school students perform some amount of volunteerism, community service is far more prevalent in education than service-learning, which educators say is more expensive and time-consuming.

But many service-learning proponents say forced volunteerism risks alienating students who reflexively resist things they are forced to do.

"The gift without the giver is bare," said Jean Gibrán, a longtime service-learning specialist in the Boston public schools, referencing a poem by James Russell Lowell. "If they have to do it, it becomes more of a burden."

Others insist that such requirements, rather than cheapening volunteerism, help expose more students to it, especially teenagers who tend to be less inspired to be involved who stand to benefit most from helping others. Kristin McSwain, who directs the Massachusetts Service Alliance, a private nonprofit group that promotes community service, said studies have shown that if young people do not volunteer before graduation, they are less likely to donate their time later.

"If you get just a few kids a year hooked on it, you've really created something lasting," said Alice Melnikoff, community service coordinator at Belmont High School, which requires students to volunteer 40 hours.

Apart from academics, volunteering can help students in a myriad of ways. By helping others, some shy teenagers will break out of their shell, and some immature teens will become less self-centered, teachers say. By seeing how people outside of their own circles live, students may become more worldly and socially aware.

"You see a completely different side of kids when they volunteer," said Al McNeill, who teaches a semester service-learning elective at Framingham High School.

For one of his students, junior Lauren Nickerson, volunteering was an epiphany. This winter, she collected and delivered food to low-income seniors. Seeing their hardship for herself, she said, changed her world view.

"With the reading, it's abstract," she said. "When you are out in the community and actually see it, it becomes real. I started to see the world completely differently. Everything was so new. It's made me more thankful."

Dobson, the nursing home resident from Millbury, counts herself as a service-learning convert. She enjoyed spending time with Dean and the other students, and learned a lot from them, too.

"It's another way to learn," she said. "And it worked out nicely for me."

*Peter Schworm can be reached at [schworm@globe.com](mailto:schworm@globe.com).*

**© Copyright 2003 Globe Newspaper Company.**