



Connecting with the Community

Laurie Chetelat

Connections Volunteer Center, Stephen Decatur High School, Worcester County

"Connections" is a student developed and run volunteer center based out of Stephen Decatur High School. The center serves as a liaison between students and community organizations to regulate, organize, and increase the "supply and demand" of student volunteers. The center will undergo multi-phases of development, but is currently offering services to students as it continues to expand to fulfill its complete mission. So far, the project has created more open communication between the school and the community. [Best practices:](#)

Best Practice 1: What recognized community need was met by your project? The project addresses the need for a centralized system to identify service opportunities for students. Connections will act as the much-needed facilitator between students and local community organizations. It will serve as a resource for the ninth graders fulfilling their service-learning requirement, as well as assist upperclassmen looking for enrichment volunteer opportunities and scholarships. The project has opened the lines of communication between the school and community based organizations. More students will now be able to become more involved in their community and meet a variety of real community needs.

Best Practice 2: How was the project connected to the school curriculum and curricular objectives? "Connections" acts as a facilitator between students who need to fulfill the service-learning graduation requirement and the community organizations that depend on student volunteers. Service-learning allows students to take the skills they learn in school and apply them to "real life" situations. In addition, students are able to explore areas of interest for future careers through service-learning. In the government curriculum, students learn about the role of government in our community. Service-learning allows students to actually participate in and affect programs funded by the government and to increase their understanding of their civic responsibility as a U.S. citizen. Connections has been instrumental in increasing the number of SDHS students who participate in service projects beyond the required hours mandated by the state of Maryland.

Best Practice 3: How did participants reflect on their experiences throughout the project? Throughout the project, Connection members met to reflect on the success of the group. They

continually reevaluate their progress and make changes when necessary. They have also invited various community organizations to speak at meetings and to discuss their needs and how Connections can assist them with volunteers. Most recently, Habitat for Humanity and the Ocean City Surfrider Foundation attended Connection's meetings. Currently, Connections is planning a community breakfast roundtable discussion to inform the community how Connections can help meet their needs and the needs of students.

Best Practice 4: How did students take leadership roles and take responsibility for the success of the project? Connections is completely a student driven project and organization with guidance provided by a faculty advisor, Mrs. Laurie Chetelat. This project began when two students, **Caroline Andes and Joe Chen**, wrote a mini-grant to

the Maryland Youth Leadership Safe Schools Mini-Grant Program during the 2002-2003 school year. Caroline and Joe developed the idea to create the Connections organization from their own experiences as ninth graders. When the organization began, students elected officers, set up committees, and selected committee chairpersons. To increase public awareness about the organization, students developed a brochure to give to the



freshman classes during classroom presentations about Connections. Students are responsible for planning and attending meetings, organizing the center, meeting with freshman classes and individual students, returning phone calls from community based organizations, and organizing the community breakfast. Students search for new ideas and grants to fund the organization. Student leaders from the organization meet with the principal and county service-learning supervisor when necessary. Students in the organization plan to extend the organization to other schools in Worcester County. Students have also worked with Habitat for Humanity to begin a youth chapter of that organization at the school.

Best Practice 5: What community partners were worked with on this project? Connections is an organization that works directly with community organizations. Recently, Connections has worked closely with the local elementary and middle schools, Habitat for Humanity, the Ocean City Surfrider Foundation, Leukemia Society, Berlin Chamber of Commerce, local recreation centers, and the Maryland Youth Action Corps. Connections is inviting over 70 non-profit organizations to a community breakfast to establish relationships so the database of community-based organizations for Connections can be expanded. Last year, Connections received \$2,500 from the Safe School Mini-Grant program to set up the center with a computer, phone line, answering machine, and office supplies. Students also used the funds to make a brochure that was professionally copied. The community breakfast is being funded in part by donations, money from the Safe School mini-grant, and from the school system's Learn and Serve America sub grant. In addition, Stephen Decatur High School provides the office space and furniture. Currently, Connections needs to raise additional funding for computer ink, office supplies, and the phone line.

Best Practice 6: How did you prepare and plan ahead for the project? Students determined the need for a volunteer center at Stephen Decatur High School from their own experiences and by talking with the freshman classes. Caroline Andes and Joe Chen met with Mrs. Chetelat to plan for the organization and brainstorm how to involve large numbers of students. Caroline and

Joe then began their task of writing the mini-grant. They also attended meetings of the Maryland Youth Action Corps to learn more about service-learning programs. Joe and Caroline invited the student body to the first Connections meeting. They set up an agenda and outlined the goals, mission statement, and identified the roles for students who would become members. Their next step was to inform the faculty at Stephen Decatur. For this, they prepared and presented a PowerPoint presentation about the organization. Currently, this project is on going with the current phrase involving the community organizations about Connections.

Best Practice 7: What knowledge and skills did students develop through this project? The students involved directly in this project learned how to write a grant, plan a project, plan a budget, and chair a meeting. They also developed leadership skills. Students who have used the organization as a resource have had success finding quality service-learning projects that will enhance their educational experience.



**Decatur High School
Berlin, Maryland**