

Serving Seniors

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Subject Area: Reading, Language Arts, Social Science, Math, Science

Grade Level: 4-8

"Serving Seniors" is a service-learning unit infused within the curriculum. A list of objectives concerning the elderly were matched with existing curriculum objectives so no material was added or deleted in any subject area. The result was 36 lessons to be taught throughout the school year. A time line was developed to ensure coverage of the lessons by months. Three or more lessons per month, such as those concerning the characteristics of the elderly and becoming responsible citizens are taught within a particular class connected with the objective. All lessons or parts can be adapted to meet your time frame. All necessary stories, pages to be made into overheads or duplicated, and a list of craft supplies and party ideas are included in the unit. The unit not only provides positive self-esteem, but makes the curriculum come alive.

Preparation: Lessons include readings, discussions, practicing communication and active-listening skills, sensitivity training, and guest speakers.

Action: Lessons involve letter writing, creating holiday cards, interviews with the elderly, each reading class planning and executing one senior party, and a culminating senior picnic in the Spring in which all students are involved.

Reflection: This is an ongoing process within each lesson through oral or written exercises. A final written prompt and a photo album of the year's activities complete the reflection piece.

Meet a recognized need in the community: In order to understand needs within a community, students watch "Today's Heroes," and discuss and list community needs and locate articles depicting service. Students will send cards and letters to seniors during holidays. Time is also scheduled to complete oral histories or seniors, which are summarized and shared with the community. Monthly senior visitations are scheduled to bridge the gap between young and old. Since many seniors do not have family nearby, classes adopt a grandparent for a small fee, which provides assistance during the holidays.

Achieve curricular objectives through service: Through math classes, students perform statistical computations using data, and graph data. In Language Arts/Reading, students define and list ways to communicate, and practice active listening. Both K-W-L and main idea/details webs are employed while reading stories to list problems the elderly may encounter and make decisions about old things losing value. Students use critical thinking skills and compare/contrast to show conflict in both our lives and that of the seniors. Students use decision-making strategies to complete an organizer about the problems and challenges seniors' face, and to learn about the pros and cons of making choices. Several readings provide the background for writing assignments. These strategies not only meet curricular goals, but provide performance-based activities linked to Maryland State Performance Assessment Program. In Social Studies, students create a career chart and write a summary about careers that involve working with the elderly. The sensitivity lab in Science, helps students better understand physical and mental changes related to aging. Linking curricular objectives with information about the elderly makes learning more fun.

Reflect throughout service-learning experience: Oral discussions during each lesson helps students gain a better understanding about the material being presented, and helps prepare them for the visitations. Reflection also involves drawing conclusions about the things losing value, and using critical thinking skills to discuss what has been learned about conflict throughout history. After each visitation, students reflect about what was learned and if changes need to be made. A final reflection piece from a written prompt is completed and placed in a portfolio. Continuing to add to the photo album, articles in the local paper, and creating a display board are other ways used to engage students in reflection.

Develop student responsibility: Being an active participant during this unit shows how the students are responsible citizens, helping others in the community. Students are given a choice in making cards and how the assignments will be completed. The writing assignments and the oral history presentation force the students to meet deadlines. When planning the visitations, students choose a committee and share responsibility with others in getting their jobs completed. Completing all the requirements for the unit results in gaining their Service-Learning credit for the year, and demonstrates responsibility, a lifelong skill.

Establish community partnership: The teacher establishes connections with the Department of Aging in order to schedule visitations and gain a resource list of speakers. The Department of Aging speaker shares slides of the services provided to seniors, and explains how students can provide service. A panel of speakers (nutritionist, nurse, hospice worker, physical therapist, policeman, and others) discusses their career and the role they play working with seniors. A medical doctor and a panel of senior citizens are other partners who visit the school so the students can interact and gain from their experience. Teachers, students and community partners collaborate to make visitations a positive experience.

Plan ahead for Service-Learning: Students are given the opportunity to develop questions to interview seniors for the oral history and panel discussions. Developing committees and meetings with community partners are means to plan ahead for the visitations. Varied pre-writing strategies are employed for the holiday cards and written assignments. All preparation lessons and oral discussions help the students plan for service.

Equip students with knowledge and skills needed for service: Students discuss citizenship, rights and responsibilities as described in the Constitution and in the First Amendment. Citizens responsibility is further developed through "Build a Citizen," in which body parts denote aspects of good citizenship. The ability to produce charts and graphs to describe information gained from data collection and a panel of speakers is necessary in this unit. Students practice communication, active listening, and questioning techniques to complete oral histories and participate in visitations. The medical doctor provides the information about the physical and mental changes affected by aging, and the Department of Aging speaker provides the knowledge needed to understand the needs of and services for seniors. This knowledge and skills are a vital element.