

Kids CAN Make a Difference!

By Natalie Janiszewski

After 9/11/01, many students reported feeling depressed or anxious about the future. They were overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems facing their future and felt powerless in their ability to affect change. Research recognizes the importance of students' awareness of societal problems, but suggests that it is equally important to teach students the strategies and skills for solving these problems (Hungerford & Volk, 1991). This supports a growing movement in service-learning that provides students with a more balanced view of the world by focusing on solutions in addition to problems (Chesapeake: Choices & Challenges 1995). By teaching our youth skills for identifying and solving problems, the "Have a Heart for the Homeless" project provided an excellent framework for enhancing self-efficacy and self-esteem (Conrad & Hedin, 1991). Our 8th grade students completed an indirect service-learning project in January and February 2002. It was our goal that students demonstrate every individual's role in affecting positive change. In fact, our motto throughout this project was, "Kids CAN make a difference!" We worked with a local homeless shelter to collect personal hygiene items at our school, which were then donated to adults and families in need in Howard County. All of our activities were created to help, in some way, individuals who are underprivileged in our community.

Best practices:

- **What recognized community need was met by your project?** Homeless shelters receive most of their donations during the holiday season, but are in need of items throughout the year. Our service-learning project provided a community homeless shelter with food items, personal items, first aid supplies, cleaning supplies, paper products, gift certificates, baby items, games, and school supplies. The shelter identified the items they could use to help the homeless.
- **The following Maryland Learning Outcomes** were achieved through our service-learning project. An explanation of how the outcomes were achieved follows each Outcome. Social Studies: Analyze examples in which individuals and groups bring about civic improvement. By helping the homeless, students realized that their efforts directly impacted and changed the lives of people in our community. Math: Organize, display and interpret data using tables, pictographs, and bar graphs. Graphs of each homeroom's contributions were created. These graphs determined which homeroom earned the reward for bringing in the most donations. English: Write essays for an intended audience and purpose that state the thesis or purpose of the paper, that follow an organizational pattern, and that offer compelling evidence in the form of facts and details to support the thesis. Students wrote a description of our project for the PTA newsletter, our news broadcast at school, and local newspapers.
- **Discussion and brief written responses to prompts** provided the vehicle by which students reflected on their service-learning. For example, after watching a video, "Shelter Boy," students wrote down what they could do to help a boy like the one in the video. At the end of the project, students invited the speaker from Grassroots, our local shelter, to come back to accept our donations. After hearing how the donations would help the people Grassroots serves, the students wrote how the service-learning impacted their community.
- **Each group of students was assigned a task** in relation to the project. For example, one group was responsible for maintaining the graphs, another for advertising the project, and another for collection of the donations. Within each group, the students were responsible for ensuring the success of our project.

- Our **community partners** for this project were Grassroots, the student body, and the Parent Teacher Association.
- We **prepared and planned** for the project by watching "Shelter Boy," a video about a 12-year-old boy and his family who were homeless. Students analyzed how they could help people like those in the video. A speaker from Grassroots, a local homeless shelter, talked to the students about homelessness in our community. The speaker identified how our service project would help people in need.
- People who are homeless are not addicted to drugs or lazy citizens who don't want to work. Students now understand that homelessness is not a choice that some people make. Circumstances beyond a person's control contribute to homelessness, and that is why it is so important that community members become involved in helping the homeless get back on their feet. Students also saw the **real world applications** of writing and graphing skills. Students also used organizational skills to ensure the efficiency of collecting and packaging the items for the shelter.