Elementary School-Wide Service

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At Somerset Elementary, we have developed a K-5 sequence integrating service-learning as a teaching strategy with other aspects of the Montgomery County curriculum, where each grade has a focused curriculum area that integrates our MCPS academic indicators, curriculum standards, character education connections and service opportunities. Each grade level project is further connected to the county guidance five domains: personal development, academic development, interpersonal development, healthy development and career development. The school counselor addresses these domains through school-wide assemblies, classroom lessons, and small-group meetings.

Meet a recognized community need: Our school community has a long history of engaging in community service. However, we wanted to meet an authentic need in our community by designing effective service-learning projects that were curriculum-based and linked to academic content and standards. We also wanted to develop a consistent approach across grade levels by providing opportunities for young people to give back to their communities while studying academic disciplines. Each grade level team chose an area of the curriculum where they were most interested in integrating a service opportunity for students. Community needs met by our students include improving the habitat of a local stream, connecting with senior citizens in an intergenerational study, lifting spirits through poetry readings and "thoughtful treasures" for the sick children at the National Institute of Health's Children's Inn, and helping the homeless population in Montgomery County.

Project Summaries by Grade Level:
Kindergarten: Students develop relationships with senior citizens through shared reading experiences. **1st grade:** Students write original poetry to send to patients at National Institute of Health at the Children's Inn. **2nd grade:** Students study butterflies of Maryland and help a partner school to construct their own butterfly garden. **3rd grade:** Students compare a plant's life cycle to a human's life cycle by engaging with senior citizens. Students write a biographical sketch of the seniors they interview. **4th grade:** Students are improving the health of a local stream after studying the effects of erosion at the Chesapeake Bay. Students harvest natural bay grasses in their classrooms to be transplanted into the Chesapeake Bay. **5th grade:** Students read and critique non-fiction vignettes about service-learning experiences through the Peace Corps. One of the fifth grade classes is focusing on studying the homeless problem in Montgomery County and leading the school in an indirect service project to gather supplies for homeless shelters.

Achieve curricular objectives: First, we identified targeted objectives and essential questions. Then we made natural connections to other areas of the curriculum (i.e. reading, writing, math, social studies, science, art, listening, and/or speaking). A project description was designed for each grade level. Following the format used in the Service Learning Tool-Kit designed by the Education Commission of the States and Compact for Learning and Citizenship, we developed grade level charts that communicated the targeted learning indicators with their associated classroom activities and service activities.

Reflect through the service-learning experience: Students reflect throughout the implementation of these projects. Students have opportunities to reflect during classroom meetings, oral dialogue and journal reflections. Younger students reflect orally and pictorially. As students complete projects, they communicate their reflections via our school website, PTA newsletter and our end of the year school wide "Awards Assembly".

Develop student responsibility: As students become involved in specific service-learning projects, a strengthened sense of social and civic responsibility was fostered. Having authentic opportunities to apply their classroom learning increased student motivation and participation. Structured reflection time helps students to develop a heightened awareness of community needs by making meaningful connections to their peers, teachers and their community. Students' risk-taking skills were also enhanced. By engaging students directly in the process of planning, making decisions, and assessing what was learned from their experiences, students took the lead in finding solutions to problems and becoming more cognizant of the needs in their own community and the importance of service.

Establish community partnerships: We have enlisted the help of local senior centers, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, entomologists at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, and a core group of parents that form a school service-learning committee. Our school's non-profit foundation was essential to the development and follow-through of these projects, ensuring funds and guidance.

Plan ahead for service-learning: Our school's foundation was instrumental in the development and oversight of these projects. After submitting a grant proposal to the Somerset Foundation this summer, we began developing a bank of service-learning possibilities for each grade level. Each team leader submitted areas of the curriculum in which they wanted to integrate service-learning opportunities. Upon completing the curriculum writing, we led two staff trainings, highlighting service-learning as a teaching strategy, and we led a PTA meeting to share our work with the community.

Equip students with knowledge and skills needed for service: A variety of learning goals are met through these projects. A common goal for every grade level is citizenship. Additionally, each grade level connects to age-appropriate language arts objectives. For example, first graders are writing poetry for personal expression, while third graders are writing to inform their audience about the life of a senior citizen. Projects have either a science or social studies focus. Fourth grade's project, for example, connects the study of geographic characteristics in social studies with the "Ecosystems" unit in science.