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Literacy as Violence Prevention

Last fall, Sheila General's eighth-grade students returned to Grover Washington Jr. Middle School in Philadelphia wanting to focus their yearlong service-learning project on Hurricane Katrina. The disaster had dominated the news in the last weeks of summer, and the students were eager to do something to help.

General, a member of Philadelphia-based Need in Deed's *My Voice* Teacher Network, knew that focusing the project on a local issue would give her students opportunities to interact with members of their own community — and that direct service would likely have a more powerful effect on the students. She asked the students whether any of the Katrina survivors' problems might also affect young people in their own Philadelphia neighborhoods.

To arrive at an answer, the students conducted a survey with friends, family members, and teachers. They learned that literacy is an important issue in their community. It was of particular concern among fifth-grade teachers at Grover who said many of the school's incoming fifth-graders have difficulty reading. Since, as eighth-grader Genesis Leal said, "Reading is part of everyday life and it is important for everybody," the class' essential question became: "What can we do to improve literacy in our community?"

The students also began to wonder about potential connections between illiteracy, violence, and incarceration. They read letters from inmates at a Pennsylvania state prison, Graterford, which described how feelings of failure in school led to truancy and eventually, criminal activity. Through research, the students also learned that prison facility planners use illiteracy statistics in young children to estimate the number of jail cells that will eventually be needed in a community. This information shocked the students, and further defined the focus for their project.

They reasoned that if they could interest some of the younger children in their

community in reading at an early age, they might also be able to influence the paths these youngsters would take as their educations progressed.

The students visited Philadelphia's Children Literacy Initiative to learn how their staff works to foster a love of reading and increase children's literacy skills. To help them with their project goals, General facilitated a partnership with the Beacon Community Center at the school. Jackie Ajose, program coordinator for the Center, worked with the class once a week on various aspects of literacy for young children.

With Ajose's support, the eighth-graders wrote and illustrated books suitable for kindergarten-aged children, and each student got a "bookworm buddy" from nearby Lowell Elementary School. In mid-May, the buddies met for a Literacy Fun Day during which General's students led the little ones in various literacy-inspired games.

The Grover students feel confident their project will benefit more than just the students at Lowell. Some of them have struggled with their own literacy issues, and now they better comprehend the connection between learning to read and success later in life.

General hoped her class would "See that [by] having an impact on these kids, they won't become part of the statistics. We are trying to break the cycle."

It seems her eighth-graders did get the message. Perhaps student Janelle Day summed it up best when she said, "[Our project] will make our community a better place. The younger kids will be better readers, so when they grow up, our community will be better, too."

Meaningful service that addresses a root cause and meets an authentic community need: the best of service-learning and civic engagement. ■

Through the My Voice Teacher Network, Need in Deed (NID) provides teachers with practical, ongoing training and the support necessary to apply the My Voice service-learning framework to their teaching practice. As a professional learning community, the Network reinforces NID's goals of reaching more students and creating a sustainable, replicable approach for integrating service-learning with the curriculum. For the Network's third year, the NID staff is working with 34 teachers, representing approximately 900 students from 13 Philadelphia public elementary and middle schools.

Literacy mentors and mentees bid fond farewells on Literacy Fun Day.



by Ena Rosen,
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