

# SERVICE LEARNING IN A RURAL SETTING



## Voices For Service Learning

Service-learning is working for teachers in rural schools around the country. Almost universally, these teachers face a host of challenges: "low-income populations with a limited tax-base, struggling resource-based economies, a shortage of certified teachers, a large proportion of students considered 'at risk,' and few career opportunities for high school graduates hoping to work in their local areas" (The Rural School and Community Trust).

Despite the obstacles, innovative educators are able to tie community and student needs with rigorous education and careful reflection. They do this by carefully combining the best in service-learning theory with the realm of the possible in their home districts.

Depending on district policy and school location, service-learning activities may be limited to school grounds. Although this has prevented or limited some projects, other classes have carefully structured activities to provide genuine service to the community from within the school.

Quality service-learning in rural areas takes place in a social and environmental context very different from what is encountered in urban and suburban America. Rural practitioners of service-learning often have few organizations to partner with and daunting transportation hurdles to overcome. Rural communities often have deeply rooted complex social structures which can either support or hinder service-learning.

Rural communities have many similar challenges as their more urban counterparts, but they are uniquely faced with maintaining a balance between a rural environment and development pressures, providing a "stay option" for children when they reach maturity, and addressing a feeling of neglect that can come from being on the periphery of most political and economic activity. At the same time, rural communities are characterized by

enormous strengths, including social connectedness and cohesiveness that often translate into a wonderful sense of community and camaraderie among their residents.

Another way to sidestep the transportation problem is to invite a part of the community into the school. This has been particularly successful with senior populations. As part of English, history and civics classes, students contribute to their community's recorded history by interviewing seniors about their lives and compiling the information into videos, books or other media. Often, it is easier to bring seniors into the school than to take students to the senior center. In addition to adding to the community's understanding of its history, students and seniors in these projects tend to better understand and appreciate one another after they interact.

Finally, many rural school teachers and students have examined the concept of community and concluded that the school is a community unto itself. In many rural areas, the school is also the focal point of the larger community. Taking this approach, students have been able to develop or improve upon many current school activities or programs.

Urban, suburban or rural, all communities have room for improvement, and creative students and teachers are able to tie that improvement to the curriculum. Whether it is by providing a service for an agency from within the school, inviting community members into the school, or considering the school as the community, there are ample opportunities for uniting the curriculum with genuine service experiences in rural areas. Teachers benefit from students' heightened interest in the coursework. Students benefit from understanding that their school subjects are applicable and important. Communities benefit from uniting the assets and energy of schools with community needs.

# MARCH SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT IDEAS

## Celebrate Women's History:

Create a bulletin board to share inspiring quotes from famous women. Share the board with your school, as well as the library or neighborhood center. Write an editorial or feature about the contributions of local women to the community, and get it published! Plan a community celebration of women's contributions to the world. Educationworld.com has a great resource page with links, ideas, and events to inspire your classes.



## Ask Questions:

International Ask a Question Day is a perfect opportunity to begin service learning projects. With your students, ask questions like: What does our school need? How can we help the community? What can we do about...?? or any number of Why?s about problems that they see. Visit QuestionDay.com for more on making Question Day a tradition in your school.



## Bring Water to the World:

Get involved in the UN's World Water Day. Contact the local Environmental Protection Agency or Fish and Wildlife to talk about the water and conservation needs of the local community. Hold an observance in your school, advocating clean water for all, or raise money to buy a gift of water through UNICEF's Inspired Gifts Catalogue. Check out worldwaterday.org for more events and ways to get involved.



## Curriculum Specific Ideas:

### Math & Economics

- Do a Nutrition Math unit to learn about healthy eating habits and the price of feeding a family. Organize a food drive to support a local food bank or soup kitchen, using the food pyramid.



### Arts & Humanities

- Celebrate Music in Our Schools Month and the March Forth initiative with performances for your community. Take music to town hall, nursing homes, libraries and more. Tie music to events for other projects: host Women in Music concert. Visit [www.menc.org](http://www.menc.org) for more Music in Our Schools events and ideas.



### Science

- Take your studies of the water cycle and create a bulletin board to advocate conservation and clean water in your area.
- As spring begins, raise flowers in window boxes or a greenhouse and sell them to support and advocate neighborhood gardens.



### Language Arts

- Host Read Across America events at your school, and even promote them at libraries and other public places. Run a Family Read event at your school to get everyone involved, and couple it with a collection of slightly used books to donate to a hospital, shelter or another school.



### Physical Education & Health

- Promote National Nutrition Month with a Healthy Lunch or Healthy Snacks project. Put together simple recipes and guidelines for eating healthier and share them with younger students, families and early childhood centers.



### Social Studies

- Study the lives of important contemporary women from the around the world. What are their accomplishments, challenges and goals? Share these accomplishments with the important women in your students' lives and with the community in a celebration of International Women's Day.



# COMMUNITY GARDENING: A SCHOOL AND NEIGHBORHOOD PROJECT



Community gardening offers a wide range of service-learning possibilities and opportunities and can be used in every grade level and classroom. These efforts can range from creating a small classroom or school garden consisting of a few plants, to adopting an abandoned plot of land and gardening the entire area as a school-wide project.



## Academics, Character and Service-Learning Based Skills

Classes that incorporate gardening do more than simply teach children about horticulture. They can fulfill multiple academic standards, teach positive character traits and help students explore future professions in an exciting and interactive manner.

Students can fulfill reading, writing, speaking and listening standards by writing letters to fundraise and to generate publicity for the community garden, creating portfolios that include writing from a range of content areas documenting the details of their project, and giving oral presentations based on their research and experiences. Lessons that fulfill environment and ecology standards are integral to this project, as well. Students can learn about native plants, the dangers of pesticides and other chemical products, the necessity for the protection of land and the benefits of organic gardening and composting. They can also study the interactions of ecosystems and how humans fit in to these systems through their use of natural resources.

Community gardening also opens a space in which to incorporate character education lessons. Tilling land and holding some type of ownership over its fruits can foster within students an understanding about the importance of gardens, community space, respect for land and others' work, responsibility for a community's well-being, teamwork and many other values. The class can learn and improve upon character traits such as respect, responsibility, patience, reliability and generosity through structured activities and reflection exercises, while learning to value their team members and the community with which they serve. In this way, academic learning, community service and character education lessons are vitally linked with one another in community gardening, creating a solid, tangible and valuable experience for the students and the community.

## How to Start

If you would like to start out small, especially in the winter months, you can start a garden in the classroom that can be moved to an outdoor plot in the spring. Have your students make contacts with local gardeners or gardening centers to find someone, preferably a Master Gardener, who is willing to give advice, make suggestions and help out in your first stages of learning about gardening. Students can research different types of plants, such as perennials, annuals, flowering plants and vegetables, and learn what kinds of care various plants need. These lessons will allow your students to

determine what plants would be appropriate for their project and help them design a garden that is aesthetically pleasing and practical for the selected area.

Composting is another possibility for the classroom during the winter. Students can learn how a compost heap works by recycling food items that would otherwise be thrown out and learning what nutrients are necessary for rich soil.

Students can also write letters to community organizations and businesses to find funding for their project. Local gardening and hardware stores may be able to make donations in supplies or time, while other groups may simply donate money. With this preparation, you and your students will be completely ready to begin planting and watching your garden grow once spring rolls around!



## Ensuring Student Voice and Participation

Depending on the grade and needs of your class, students can be involved in the project at different levels of activity. In the project's ideal state, students will be responsible for conducting the community needs assessment, designing, building and planting the garden, working with the community to find additional sources for fundraising, and encouraging the community to take part ownership of the gardens to sustain them during the summer. These tasks can be adjusted as the class level necessitates without lessening the success of the service learning project.

Reflection activities for this project are essential for all academic levels and can take a variety of forms throughout the project's existence. These activities can incorporate journal writing, portfolio creation, group discussion, oral presentations and other appropriate exercises. The exercises should focus on the students' changing perceptions about the community, the importance of gardening with that community and what it means to be a citizen and to serve one's community. They can also focus on what they've learned about land, plants and ecosystems, and what other projects they'd like to pursue with that knowledge.

A project such as this one can offer students a broad and meaningful experience in academics and community service. Most importantly, these gardens can be sustained year after year with class/community partnerships, ensuring that your program can grow and build upon itself with each new school year.



## 21st Century Skills in Our Economy STEM Seminar Series

**WHO:** Teachers K-12

**WHEN:** March 11, 2009

**TIME:** 5:00-7:00 p.m.

**WHERE:** Ionia County ISD

**COST:** FREE

## Facing the Future In-Service Workshop

**WHO:** Secondary Teachers

**WHEN:** March 25, 2009

**TIME:** 8:30-3:30 p.m. (Lunch Provided)

**WHERE:** Ionia County ISD

**COST:** Free



**HURRY!**

**Sign Up for these Workshops Today!**

**[www.ioniaisd.org](http://www.ioniaisd.org)**

