

Knit One, Purl Two, Change the World



Courtesy photos

10 steps to starting your own service learning program • By Cullen Curtiss

Picture a group of 20 second graders seated

in a circle, knitting wool scarves and hats on looms, while listening to their teacher read aloud from *Little House on the Prairie*. For five years, students of Kirsten Miller at Rio Grande School have made at least two warm accessories apiece for Santa Fe's homeless population, distributed through the Interfaith Community Shelter. The scene may sound quaint, but it is actually an example of engaged and creative activism, adding up to hundreds of hats and scarves protecting people from our cold winters, and many hours that children spend learning the value of service.

Perhaps you'd like to instill and nurture in your students the values of giving back but don't know where to begin. The urge to help others is incredibly strong in both children and adults. This desire is a good place to start, but thoughtfully addressing questions about your students' ages, interests and abilities must be among your first steps before setting up a service learning program.

Here are 10 steps we at Rio Grade School have found to be effective.

1. Understand what service learning is. Community service *work* is different from a service learning *program*. Service learning is curriculum-based and structured as a class requirement, with learning goals that are integrated into the curriculum. Service work is regular volunteerism.

2. Examine your school's core values. Confirm that the implementation of service learning can meet your school's mission, so that you will have the full support of teachers, staff, the school governing body and parents. Rio Grande's program, for example, came from defined core values that include character development, environmental stewardship and diversity and inclusivity. Determine the core values that will relate most naturally to service learning at your school and gear projects around these values.

3. Consider the ages you serve. Service learning works best when projects have relevant and developmentally-appropriate ties in your curriculum per grade. For example, kindergartners might not be best suited for managing a river stewardship project, but this would be a great fit for sixth graders who have studied river ecology. Kindergartners will likely enjoy visiting a retirement community and singing songs a few times a year. Second graders, who are improving in attention span and dexterity, might be well suited for a hands-on project such as knitting hats and scarves. Fifth or sixth grade students, who can understand and articulate the importance of recycling, could organize a recycling collection program for the school.

4. Structure the work within your school schedule. Allow time for introduction of the concept, time for work in and outside of the classroom, and time reflection or sharing.

Ideally, service learning is a yearlong, academic pursuit that weaves in and out of the fabric of the students' experience. It should provide frequent opportunities for students to introduce, act and reflect on their service learning work.

5. Engage students' and educators' passion. In selecting a service job for a classroom, let them be inspired to choose something meaningful to them. "The project work must be meaningful to the educator and the students," said Ellie Najman, third grade teacher. "Your heart has to be in the work because it is part of the fabric of your whole academic year, and you have 20 little minds looking to you for passion and meaning. The more meaningful, the more opportunity for reflection."

6. Form community partnerships. Find an organization that is willing to commit to working with young people and educators through visits and engagement with constituents. Many nonprofit organizations need support,

but not all have the capacity to accommodate 20 young volunteers. Don't, for example, pick an animal service organization that is hesitant to teach children how to engage with animals. Do pick a conservation organization with a curriculum geared to children, or one that has the capacity to teach about its mission. Visit the physical site and see if you can picture your students working and learning there.

7. Identify the learning goals for each project. Let's say you decide that adopting a stretch of the Santa Fe River is important because your students have a yearlong focus on water and ecosystems. What do you hope they will learn? Is the intermittent flow a good topic? How might you analyze the volume and type of debris they find? What do healthy rivers mean to communities? What's the importance of a protected watershed? Set at least five learning goals and discuss them with the students.

8. Enlist parent and family support. More than carpool drivers and classroom volunteers, adult family members can reinforce service concepts at home. Just as a new language cannot be adopted in class hours only but requires reinforcement at home, so does service learning work require time for questions about different populations and different needs.

9. Promote service learning programs within the community and beyond. Identifying and sharing the importance of service learning to the school's mission will ensure that the program is supported now and grows in future years. Record and share, record and share — but before you do, make sure you get permission from parents to use photographs of their children in print material and on social media. The leaders of the service organizations might be willing to publicize your students' effort, which is a beautiful way to showcase your school's work in the community.

10. Reinforce the meaning of service learning. Make sure that the principal or director of your school recognizes each grade's efforts publicly so the value is understood across all grades.

While the steps required to start a service learning program may seem daunting, they are crucial and will help you and your community be prepared to embrace the good work ahead!

Cullen Curtiss is the admissions director of Rio Grande School.



This Page: Sixth graders maintain the school's section of the Santa Fe River, as they learn about river ecology (and have fun). Previous Page: Second grade students knit hats and scarves to donate to the Interfaith Community Shelter.

**HELP FEED
NORTHERN
NEW MEXICANS
IN NEED**



Donate · Advocate · Volunteer



**Every dollar
donated
provides
4 meals**



www.thefooddepot.org
1222 A Siler Rd
505-471-1633

Save the date!
Jan. 21, 2017

SANTA FE CHILDREN'S MUSEUM



Holiday Hours - Open Daily
Dec. 17th - Jan. 3rd
Mon. - Sat. 10am - 5pm, Sun. 12 - 5pm
*Closed Christmas and New Year's Day. Normal hours resume 1/4/17.

- Holiday Trains, Dec. 17th - 31st
- Winter Solstice, Dec. 18th, 5:30 - 7:30pm

Proudly Serving Santa Fe for 31 Years

1050 Old Pecos Trail, Santa Fe • 505-989-8359
www.santafechildrensmuseum.org