

Learning through community service

by Peggy McElhinney, Danvers High School Curriculum Director
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You see them whenever you drive by marshy areas: the tall, light-brown, reed-like plants known as phragmites. What you may not know is that this invasive species is encroaching on native flora and impacting the migratory patterns of birds. Mr. Hodsdon's sixth-grade science students at the Holten-Richmond Middle School can tell you much about the ecological impact of this species. Over the last two years, Mr. Hodsdon's students have been collecting data on the local impact of phragmites as part of a larger study being conducted by the Audubon Society. The students have had the opportunity to present their findings at wetlands conferences and at last year's statewide community service-learning conference. The project is an example of community service-learning, an instructional approach in which students learn curriculum framework standards through service activities. Community service-learning allows students to see the real-life applications of what they are learning in the classroom. The approach helps to answer the age-old student question, "Why do we have to know this?"

For the last several years, the Danvers school district has been the recipient of community service-learning grants funded through Learn and Serve America and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The grants have enabled the district to provide teachers with training in the community service-learning approach, as well as funding for specific projects. This year, the school district is serving as a regional mentoring center to help other districts learn about community service-learning. On December 18th, we offered a one-day introductory training that included not only 15 teachers from the Danvers district, but also 22 teachers and administrators from seven other districts: Lynn, Lynnfield, Medway, Milton, Peabody, Salem, and Whitman-Hanson. The district is currently offering an introductory after-school course that will repeat in the spring, and we will also offer a one-day advanced training in May.

Community service-learning has taken different forms in Danvers. Teachers like Mr. Hodsdon integrate service projects into their regular curriculum. Examples exist in various curriculum areas. Ms. Boulger's transition program students learned about science and health standards by growing a garden and selling their vegetables to raise funds for the Danvers People-to-People Food Pantry. For the last several years, Ms. Jenkins' Spanish V students have used their language skills to write Spanish plays based on Latin American legends, and have performed these plays in conjunction with second-grade classes from the Thorpe and Riverside elementary schools. The high school also offers two community service-learning electives: the Service-Learning class taught by Ms. White, and the Community Service-Learning for the Latino Community class taught by Ms. Jenkins. In these classes, students have the opportunity to develop projects of interest to them based on needs presented by community partners who visit the classes at the beginning of the semester. Through these classes, high school students have worked with elementary school students to write letters to soldiers as part of Operation Troop Support, used their Spanish language skills to help elementary school students in the Boys and Girls Club of Lynn with their homework, and created a garden at the Spectrum Adult Day Health Center to benefit Alzheimer's patients. These are just a few examples of the many service-learning projects that have been developed as a result of these classes.

Community service-learning benefits both students and the larger community. In addition to learning academic content and skills through service projects, students learn valuable citizenship skills. In the process, community needs are met. If you know of a community need that might be met through a service-learning project, contact Sue Tagg, the high school's community service coordinator, at dhsserves@danvers.org.