

Service Learning in the Chicago Public Schools: A Status Report ... Fall, 2001

Carlos M. Azcoitia

When Service Learning was first established in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), its dual mission was to strengthen the classroom instruction of high school students in order to improve overall academic success, and to fulfill real needs in the city of Chicago. Since the beginning of the CPS Service Learning program in 1998, a vigorous effort involving more than eighty thousand (80,000) students has taken place, and has resulted in close to two million hours of volunteer service being provided to the city of Chicago. Over half of all public high school students have already participated in Service Learning projects, with a substantial expansion projected over the next few years. In this status report, please note that these dual missions—in just three short years—have met their targeted implementation timelines, and that the original concept continues to guide program growth and development.

The Service Learning Program

Service Learning was adopted by the Chicago Board of Education as a graduation requirement in August 1997. Beginning with the graduating class of 2001, the plan obligated all students to provide 40 hours of community service (Service Learning) at some time during their high school careers. By providing thoughtfully designed opportunities for students to use their classroom learning and talents in service to and with the community, Service Learning projects directly connect students and the school they attend to the issues of their neighborhood and to the people of Chicago. Through this program, hundreds of service providers have become vested partners in the education and development of our city's youth.

A Service Learning Coach, selected by the high school principal, becomes the on-site manager of the program. This is the primary person to generate, recruit, and champion the cause of Service Learning in any given high school. He or she becomes the major link between the school and the community at large, as well as between students and their classroom teachers. The Service Learning Coach monitors student progress and agency participation, and also trains teachers relating to the instructional component of Service Learning.

Projects are connected to specific courses and classroom instruction. All have three major components: preparation and development of the activity, implementation of the plan, and a pre-determined, structured reflection on the project. Through Service Learning, teachers are able to provide meaningful applications of the knowledge and skills learned within the classroom. A strong sense of social responsibility and civic awareness is being developed, and at the same time academic learning experiences become far more concrete and genuine.

Means of Implementation

The list of community service organizations and agencies—our partners in Service Learning—has also expanded significantly since the program was established. At this point in time, nearly 200 different entities participate in the program. Working together, the Service Learning team—consisting of an agency or organization, the Service Learning Coach, the student, and the school—have several different options available to plan and implement a project. Activities can be developed in any of the following ways, or by using other mechanisms, as well:

- Agency representatives, teachers, and students work together to identify a project that builds on the strength and interests of the agency as well as on the subject area of the student. For example: The Historical Society helps a history class preserve historical property.
- Not-for-profit service organizations work with the Service Learning team on a project that meets the needs of their own particular group. For example: Students in an English class might read to children in a community day care center to increase their exposure to and enjoyment of reading.
- An extracurricular student club develops a project based on the group's mission. For example: Chess club members arrange to teach chess to 4th grade students at a local elementary school.
- An individual student could arrange to volunteer at an organization and then relate the service activities to his or her own various classroom course objectives. For example: A student might volunteer at a homeless shelter to help the nutritional advisor develop a plan to maximize donated food, using and relating to formulas learned in a math class.

Facts of Implementation

Facts substantiate the success of this program, and facts demonstrate that Service Learning, for students in Chicago high schools, is living up to the promise held out in 1997. As of June 4, 2001, these are some facts about the CPS Service Learning program:

- The total number of CPS students in all grades who are involved in program is 82,224.
- 96.27% of seniors have completed the Service Learning graduation requirement.
- 1,719,747 service hours have been provided to City recipients.
- Agency partners now number 188, with expansion continuing on an ongoing basis.

These facts have brought a ringing endorsement from every section of the Service Learning team. The program has steadily moved from its original place as an extra-curricular activity towards a far more comprehensive and meaningful part of high school culture. It provides teachers and students with an educational means to connect the resources of an entire city with CPS high school classrooms.

Future Implementation

This has been a successful and significant project for the Chicago Public Schools that will unquestionably continue to grow. Further expansion, structural modifications, and other important matters related to Service Learning will certainly be considered in the future. Whatever changes are examined, the ultimate goal is to strengthen Service Learning by providing more services to the city of Chicago, establishing forceful connections between classroom curriculum and any service activity provided, and increasing the number of agencies and organizations who participate in the program. Some potential areas of discussion for changes in the program are as follows:

- **Higher curriculum standards:** Create specific parameters so that all Service Learning projects are focused on high quality experiences that demonstrate a fundamental relationship to a student's intellectual and social growth. Underscore the concept that learning, not just service, is to be emphasized at all times in all projects and ensure that this perception is clearly understood by everyone involved.
- **Professional development:** Establish broader based professional development activities and use the plan to expand rules governing Service Learning. Train teachers in the use of Service Learning as an instructional method, and encourage use of this experiential learning as a tool that results in improved

academic performance. Develop mechanisms to receive input and work with CPS agency partners to make certain that students are properly prepared for their Service Learning experience. Include the partners in special training sessions, as well.

- **Communications:** Ongoing communications about Service Learning with agency partners is an extremely important factor, along with pre-set visitations to service sites by coaches prior to student activity. Newsletters, open houses for agencies to meet Service Learning coaches, and agency interaction with central office administrators, local school personnel, parents, and students should all be utilized on a regularly scheduled, ongoing basis. In addition, public information efforts to the community at large—including all media—should occur consistently throughout the year. A one-year community outreach communications plan that is detailed on a month-by-month basis could provide a great many opportunities to showcase Service Learning and its great successes to all of Chicago.

Conclusion

The status and success of this outstanding plan offers remarkable opportunities to every party involved in Service Learning. Students benefit from the wonderful exposure of doing something for someone else, and by understanding the link between their classroom instruction and their service to others by way of fulfilling a civic responsibility. Recipients of the service benefit from the literally millions of hours of assistance provided. Agency partners benefit because their constituencies are well served, and their very existence is strengthened by student participation. The school system itself benefits because of greatly expanded community interaction. And last, but certainly not least, Chicago benefits because so many entities are working together to support and strengthen our city.

Perhaps Martin Luther King Jr.'s important thoughts relate directly to this exceptional effort surfacing through the public school system in Chicago:

“Everyone can be great because everyone can serve.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Carlos M. Azcoitia is the deputy chief of education for the Chicago Public Schools in Chicago, Illinois.

Comprehensive Community Schools... Chicago Style

Carlos M. Azcoitia

Introduction

Students need many kinds of support in order to do well in school. The comprehensive community schools concept is based on the fundamental principle that academic success is the end product of many different factors (Halpern, 1999). This educational model underscores that the power of community involvement in schools will improve students' academic achievement and support life-long learning with success for entire families (Epstein, 1995). The comprehensive community schools plan was established in some of Chicago's public schools as one of the city's initial school reform efforts. The underlying premise of these schools acknowledges the significant impact families and communities have on a child's educational achievements. These extraordinary efforts are focused on bringing together the educational and social supports needed to help children and their families thrive.

Chicago's comprehensive community schools are public schools that combine the best educational practices with a wide range of in-house health and social services to ensure that children are physically, emotionally, and socially prepared to learn. These facilities are open in the early mornings, afternoons, evenings, weekends, and summers. Comprehensive community schools serve as true centers of community life—places where children not only attend classes, but can also receive medical and dental care, speak to a counselor about a problem, and stay after school to build reading skills, play chess, work on a computer, take art and music lessons, get help with homework, practice sports, or attend a summer camp program.

Families and community leaders also play active roles in these schools. Parents are welcomed and encouraged not only to be involved in their children's education, but also to take adult education classes, to get advice and support, to learn how to help their children succeed in school, to meet other parents, and to create their own programs, support groups, and activities.

Comprehensive community schools have proven effective (U.S. Department of Education, 1998) because many key issues are consistently addressed and children are helped in improving academically. Extra opportunities for children and families to learn and grow together take place every day as expanded lines of communication are established and trusting relationships between parents and school staff are developed. Parents are given strong support and assistance as they seek to improve their own skills, and their children are exposed to multiple positive adult role models.

A committed partnership between the school's facility and the school district's central administration, social service agencies, community organizations, and parents is an essential condition for the success of the Comprehensive Community Schools program (McLaughlin, 1994). The partners come together to give young people three key sets of supports and opportunities:

- A strong, coherent core instructional program during the regular school day;
- Social services needed to remove obstructions to learning; and
- Enrichment opportunities during non-school hours that increase students' enthusiasm for learning and their ability to succeed.

Partnerships

Comprehensive community schools collaborate with nonprofit organizations to offer a full range of programs, activities, and services for children, adults, and families, and to provide a safe haven for all who participate. While the selection of programs and services offered at each comprehensive community school varies, most include reading and math support for students, adult education and English as a Second Language classes, student and adult computer training, art activities, recreation, and health services. Of critical importance is the involvement of all stakeholders in the planning and subsequent monitoring of whatever programming does take place. School staff must ask parents what they want rather than assume that staff members always know what is best.

The range of partnerships that participate in the comprehensive community schools program is very broad. Partners may include: hospitals, health clinics, mental health providers, social service providers, youth development organizations, community development organizations, settlement houses, colleges, uni-

versities, adult education providers, museums, artists, theater companies, music teachers, Campfire Girls and Boys, 4-H Clubs, boys' and girls' clubs, scouting, computer technology trainers, businesses, libraries, park district staff, churches and other faith-based organizations, extension services, senior citizen groups, and civic organizations. The school's principal must ensure that whatever activities take place after school hours always support the academic program.

These different partners develop close, special interest in serving the students and families participating in the program. They are enthusiastic, steadfast in their support and willing to continue playing an important role in the Chicago school system's efforts to provide broad-based programs and services in comprehensive community schools. Some schools and nonprofits have developed partnership programs within the schools' buildings at no extra cost; other schools have effectively changed the way they use their own existing resources to support the expanded programs for students and families. It is unreasonable to expect schools or school districts to fund the entire cost of this effort. In Chicago, the lead nonprofit partners have sought public and private grants for new programs and to sustain existing programs.

Funding for this important program is not currently part of a stable or consistent resource and is dependent, in many cases, on additional grants. The challenge is to find a way to support this successful concept as part of ongoing, long range planning through the school district's regular budgeting process and other sustainable sources of funding.

Characteristics

All comprehensive community schools require leadership from a visionary principal who facilitates and maintains a strong sense of collaboration among staff, community partners, and parents, even though the schools may vary widely in their approaches and activities. Ideally, each school would also have a community resource coordinator, who oversees the delivery of programs and connects the regular school day curriculum with after school activities for students. Having such a person in place has proved to be most effective in implementing the comprehensive community schools model. In addition, a strong nonprofit partner is necessary to provide the social services for students and parents, and to facilitate the inclusion of other community-based organizations in the delivery of programs.

An oversight committee composed of parents, teachers, students, and community members is responsible for designing and maintaining the overall program and ensuring its effectiveness. This committee assesses school and community needs and participates in regular evaluations of the activities. Finally, an annual

provider review, coordinated by program specialists, keeps the delivery of services on track.

Results

Teachers and principals recognize that, alone, they cannot do the job of helping every child succeed; therefore, they appreciate the extra resources that the comprehensive community schools model can provide. Some community-based organizations are constrained by a lack of space or an inability to transport students to their programs and therefore value an approach that helps them to overcome these obstacles. The business community has great interest in the concept offered by this program because their future success rests on the ability of the Chicago school system to remain innovative and responsive. They believe that such new, comprehensive approaches have tremendous appeal.

Although the program is relatively new, there have already been some successes at facilities providing the basic components of comprehensive community schools. Clearly, this idea can work to accomplish what had been expected. Reduced student mobility and improved academic achievement show the value of a school's partnership with supportive nonprofit, social service-oriented organizations.

Parents report meeting other adults in after-school programs who could be trusted to help a child with a serious problem. As they come to believe that their school is a safe haven that is interested in the entire family, they are far more likely to support the school when it insists on higher expectations for learning and on appropriate behavior for all.

Comprehensive community schools, Chicago style, demonstrate that where children are in school for longer periods of time, with more chances to learn and participate in interesting and enriching programs, they begin to achieve more academically. In some of the schools, reading scores improved at rates beyond the citywide averages at participating schools.

Education does not occur in isolation from the rest of a child's life. This premise is the driving force behind the concept of comprehensive community schools. All of the different factors involved—people, programs, facilities, service partners, social services, teachers, school administrators, and parents—play extremely important and interdependent roles in the successful education of every child.

References

- Epstein, J. L. (1995). School, family and community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(9), 701-712.
- Halpern, R. (1999). After school programs for low-income children: Promises and challenges. *The future of children*, 9(2), 81-95.

- McLaughlin, M. W., Irby, M., & Langan, J. (1994). *Urban sanctuaries: Neighborhood organizations in the lives and futures of inner-city youth*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Justice. (1998). *Safe and smart: Making after school hours work for children*. Washington, DC: Author.

Carlos M. Azcoitia is the deputy chief of education for the Chicago Public Schools in Chicago, Illinois.