

Community and Family-Community Programs

SNAPSHOT

Program:
Bringing Learning to Life

District:
Columbus City Schools

Location:
Columbus, Ohio

Grades: PreK-12

Enrollment: 51,000

Free/reduced-price lunch:
77%

Making student learning relevant to everyday life

Bringing Learning to Life

Columbus City Schools

Columbus, Ohio

In survey after survey, students cite boredom and lack of experiences that connect schoolwork to the real world as underlying reasons for disengagement from school. Bringing Learning to Life is a program that helps students apply what they learn in the classroom to service projects in the community. The program received a three-year federal grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service that enhances an existing professional development agreement between the Columbus Education Association (CEA), Columbus City Schools, and The Ohio State University (OSU) College of Education and Human Ecology.

To increase academic success, especially among students in high-poverty schools, CEA and OSU teamed up to provide professional development to K-12 teachers in service-learning, a practice that unites academic instruction and learning with student-focused service in the community. The three-year grant allows Columbus teachers to enroll in a three-credit graduate course taught by an award-winning OSU faculty member.

In addition, these teachers are also eligible for mini-grants to implement hands-on community projects with students. Through the projects, students become leaders who contribute action to deserving community-based organizations, using what they are learning in class to analyze and address real-life community challenges. Typically, students become more engaged in school as they begin to see themselves as civic and socially responsible agents of change. Over the course of the three-year project period, nearly 2,000 Columbus City students will experience civic engagement and academically aligned community service firsthand.

How the program works

Bringing Learning to Life evolved from an NEA-supported project that involved two community conversations in the Linden-McKinley neighborhood. Through those discussions, parents and students expressed frustration over the high school's lack of community connectedness that could help students visualize themselves as contributing adults. The program will help connect the school with the community.

NEA and the NEA Foundation provide project direction as well as grant administration and supervision. The OSU College of Education and Human Ecology

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is responsible for instruction, the syllabus, evaluation, and assessment of teacher mini-grant applications. CEA handles purchase and distribution of materials, mini-grant dissemination, project promotion among members, and teacher recruitment for the program.

The first course offered by OSU took place during spring 2011, with 31 teachers who were chosen among 70 applicants. Another 35 teachers began their 10-week course in the summer of 2011. To expose teachers to potential service-learning partners, class sessions meet in the buildings of various community organizations in Columbus.

As part of this training, Te'Lario Watkins, a teacher at Linden-McKinley STEM Academy, is working with students on the project, "Water, Water, Everywhere." The students are participating in real-world hands-on investigations focusing on how improper disposal of hazardous materials affects water quality. They study the community water supply and work with organizations in the community that focus on reducing contamination and improving local water quality. Students then present what they have learned and make proposals for achieving a clean water supply in the Linden neighborhood of Columbus.

Evidence of effectiveness

According to the National Youth Leadership Council's K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice, effective service-learning initiatives include meaningful service, have explicit links to the curriculum, incorporate reflective practice, promote diversity, include youth voice, and engage in collaborative partnerships. The design of Bringing Learning to Life is aligned with this research and focuses on four primary goals:

- ▶ Gains in student achievement and other academic outcomes

- ▶ Improvements in student peer interactions, school attendance, enrollment in challenging programs, and participation in community service
- ▶ Improved relationships with parents, teachers, and community members
- ▶ High-quality service-learning initiatives and partnerships.

Exemplary practices

Providing meaningful professional development for teachers

- ▶ OSU's relationship with the district and the local affiliate offer a replicable model of high quality professional development.
- ▶ Teachers benefit from tuition waivers, free materials, and meeting at potential community-service sites.

Focusing on high-needs schools

- ▶ Teachers in high-poverty schools are given preference in the selection among applicants for the course.

Building community support and buy-in

- ▶ Community support is enhanced by the establishment of a project advisory board consisting of members from the board of education and a variety of key community organizations.
- ▶ The superintendent of Columbus City Schools is an important project advocate and has volunteered to host an initial principals' advisory meeting to increase administrative support.

Scaling up the program

- ▶ The project aims to broaden the use of service-learning throughout the district by establishing a culture of service-learning supported by formal policies and academic practices—first at the classroom level, then schoolwide, and eventually districtwide.

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Outlook

Many aspects of this project can be replicated in any school district that establishes a partnership with an institution of higher learning. The program will seek additional funding from private foundations beyond the three-year government grant period.

Association perspective

The program is a partnership between the Columbus Education Association, the Columbus City Schools, and The Ohio State University. As local president Rhonda Johnson puts it: "What I love about this program is that it provides both students and teachers an opportunity to tackle real community problems, and at the same time, develop 21st century skills like collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and communications."

Local contacts

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Related information

Report card: www.ode.state.oh.us/reportcardfiles/2009-2010/DIST/043802.pdf

Bringing Learning to Life flier and application:
<http://bit.ly/qp3XwK>

NEA Foundation website: www.neafoundation.org/listings/news-release/nea-foundation-awarded-550k-to-develop-national-model-for-service-learning/

More information on service-learning

Corporation for National and Community Service:
www.nationalservice.gov

Learn and Serve Ohio: www.serveohio.org/NationalService_LS.aspx

Ohio Campus Compact:
www.ohiocampuscompact.org/

Ohio United Way: www.ouw.org

National Network for Youth: www.nn4youth.org

Youth Service America: www.ysa.org

COLUMBUS, OHIO



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