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# Service Learning: Engagement, Action, Results!

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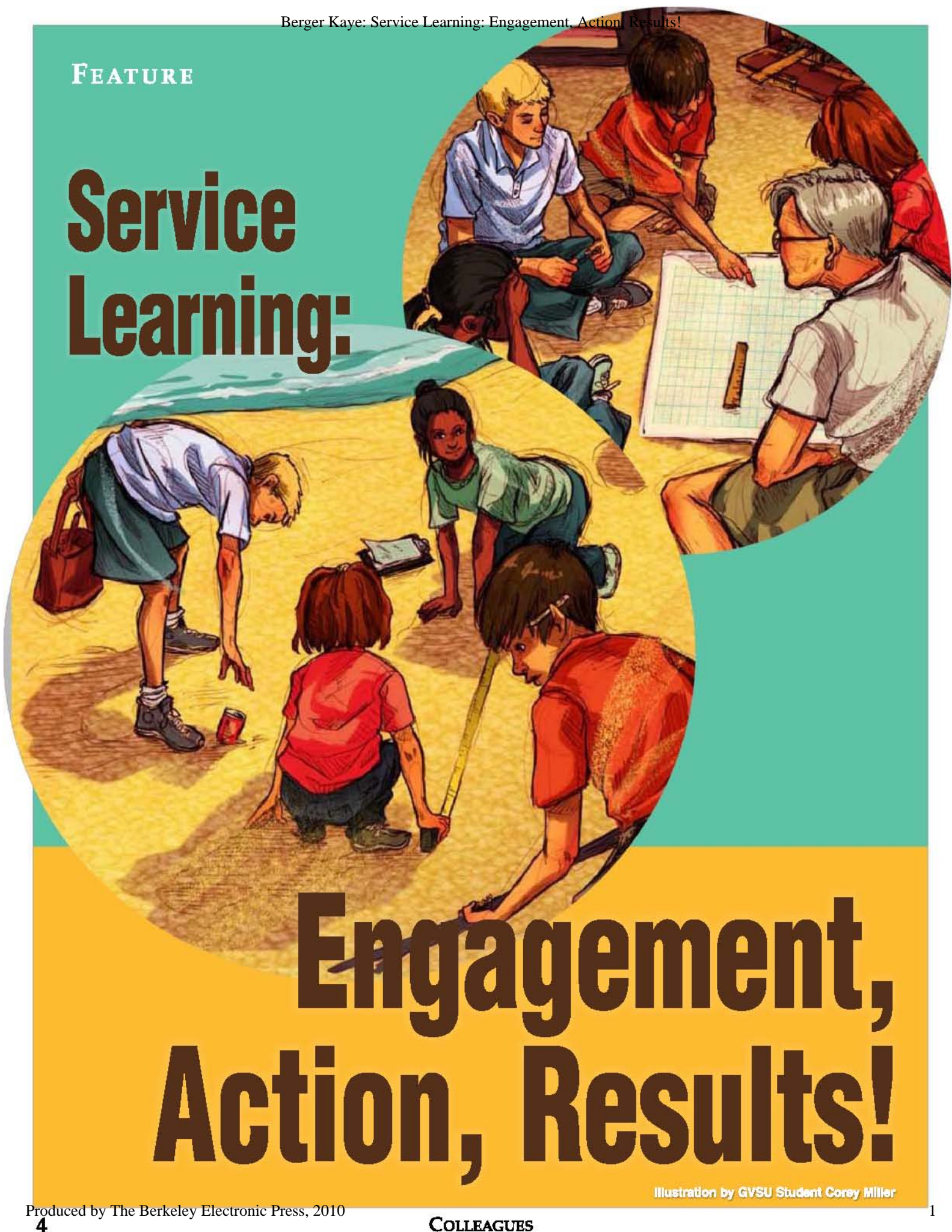
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FEATURE

# Service Learning:

# Engagement, Action, Results!

Illustration by GVSU Student Corey Miller





By Cathryn Berger Kaye, M.A., author and international service learning consultant

**H**ave you noticed? We are experiencing a global groundswell of service. The issues we face as a planet have now risen to a level that calls more of us to action. Through service learning, we can engage our young people in learning about and addressing critical issues—climate change, population migration, hunger, loss of habitat, illiteracy, and more—while contributing to the betterment of themselves and others. Young people, who are cognizant of the issues and have the problem-solving abilities to address them, matter. Providing them with the skills and knowledge to do this vital work, in their own communities and the larger world, adds relevance to the process of education.

While service learning may begin in a single classroom, the increasing value of this pedagogy often leads to a school- and district-wide initiative. In the early days, we thought service learning could be accomplished by adding a small project to whatever kids were studying, or by stopping academics to “make a difference.” Teachers and students from other academic areas or grades became interested and involved perhaps by lending a helping hand, providing information, giving advice, or otherwise joining by directly connecting their content areas to the service. Students from art classes would make posters, or a computer teacher or class would design and create brochures for a campaign on recycling. A math class might generate statistics for a civics or science effort. Service learning classrooms also can serve as natural incubators for school-wide initiatives.

This still occurs; the influence of one successful educator can be transformative. However, now we know more, and we know better. Service learning is a powerful teaching strategy that creates a conducive environment for developing transferable skills and knowledge, high engagement, and relevance that gives meaning and purpose to school—for teachers as well as students.

Teachers continually tell me that their students go beyond required assignments with service learning. They reveal hidden talents, apply themselves in ways that stretch their intellect, retain what they have learned, and transfer the skills and knowledge to new situations. With academic-rich service learning experiences, students are doing astounding work as they prepare our communities for emergencies, repair our coral reefs, protect animals, construct monuments to honor our veterans, and spend time with otherwise lonely elders. When they care about the subject

matter and have authenticated a need, students discover intrinsic motivation. This is the key.

### Transferable Skills

**W**hile the actual service performed may involve reducing our carbon footprint or documenting events in a town’s history, the transferable skills developed through the process are of paramount importance. Consider this list and the intrinsic benefit gained from internalizing these skills and being able to access them in any learning situation. These foundation incremental skills can be deliberately woven into the Five Stages of Service Learning enabling students to:

- ask questions
- listen and retain
- be observant
- identify similarities and differences
- recognize diverse perspectives
- work independently, with partners, and in groups
- identify and apply their skills and talents
- acquire assistance as needed
- be resourceful
- gather and manage information
- summarize
- take notes
- effectively solve problems
- test hypotheses
- follow through with reasonable steps

Explicit inclusion of these skills and other such skills dramatically deepens the service learning experience and applies to all populations of students. Rather than assuming students have these competencies, service learning affords opportunities to develop skills in deliberate and explicit ways as students ask questions to investigate community needs, develop step-by-step plans, construct persuasive arguments, and role-play how to ask for help when a challenge arises. The results are students who can “read” the world around them and know how to apply their skills toward learning and life.

### Gathering Information About a Community Need

**A**ll too often investigating the community need is cut short by relying on the obvious. For example, everyone knows there is hunger in the community so why can’t

we just step in and start planning a food drive? If we skip investigation, we miss an essential opportunity to conduct “research.” Often a teacher hears the same questions when a research assignment is given, “What do you want me to do?” or “How long does it have to be?” And for the vast majority of students this math equation rings true: Research = Google. In workshops, I dramatically alter this equation to: Research ≠ Google, as students and even teachers gasp!

In my approach to service learning, as students gather information about a community need, they explore four ways to do research:

- **Media**—includes books, Internet, radio, film, newspapers, magazines. If a newspaper has a cover story about homelessness three times in a month, that’s an indicator of need.
- **Interviews**—usually with a person who has expertise in the subject matter through experience or study.
- **Experience and Observation**—experience is usually what we bring from our past and observation is our deliberate noticing. This active process draws on many of the multiple intelligences.
- **Survey**—gathering response from groups of people who may have varying degrees of knowledge about the subject. Students develop diverse skills by compiling, conducting, and analyzing surveys.

Students usually gravitate towards interviews, observation, and personal experiences for their dynamic quality and the first hand learning. These processes also *add* to the body of knowledge which is the ultimate intention of research. As students genuinely investigate the need through these modalities they move beyond the obvious—there is hunger—to, *how hunger exists in our community*, and in this revelation the preparation needed and the plan of action becomes more obvious. Who did the work? Who uncovered this? The students! Yes, first graders can conduct interviews that reveal needs and similarly middle school students can design impressive surveys, and high schools students—you get the picture. The result is buy-in. Students begin to own the process.

### The Power of Engagement

**Y**outh want to solve problems and improve how we live. The most powerful incentive is engagement. People have long asked me, “How do you motivate

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students?" One day I realized I can't motivate anyone; motivation comes from within. What all of us can do is engage a person, and being engaged can lead the person to choose to be motivated. Intrinsic motivation—that's what we are aiming for!

Your engagement in high quality service learning prepares the young people you reach and teach to be the best students they can be, and to be valued contributors to our collective well-being, now and in the future. ☺

This article is adapted from *The Complete Guide to Service Learning: Proven, Practical Ways to Engage Students in Civic Responsibility, Academic Curriculum, & Social Action (Revised & Updated Second Edition)* by Cathryn Berger Kaye, M.A., © 2010. Used with permission of Free Spirit Publishing Inc., Minneapolis, MN: 800-735-7323; www.freespirit.com. All rights reserved.

### Websites

Visit these websites for exciting opportunities for teachers and students to

advance service learning; Berger Kaye, Service Learning: Engagement, Action, Results!

[www.abcdbooks.org](http://www.abcdbooks.org) Author Cathryn Berger Kaye's Web portal for books, resources, and curriculum, plus information on scheduling Cathryn for a conference, school or district, university, or organization.

[www.GoToServiceLearning.org](http://www.GoToServiceLearning.org) GoToServiceLearning presents examples of best practice service learning experiences meeting state mandated academic standards. Written by teachers, this easy-to-use format is based on the planning tool from *The Complete Guide to Service Learning*.

[www.RandomKid.org](http://www.RandomKid.org) Designed for children, classrooms and youth groups, RandomKid takes kids ideas for a better tomorrow seriously and helps them solve real-world problems.

[www.servicelearning.org](http://www.servicelearning.org) The National Service learning Clearinghouse has

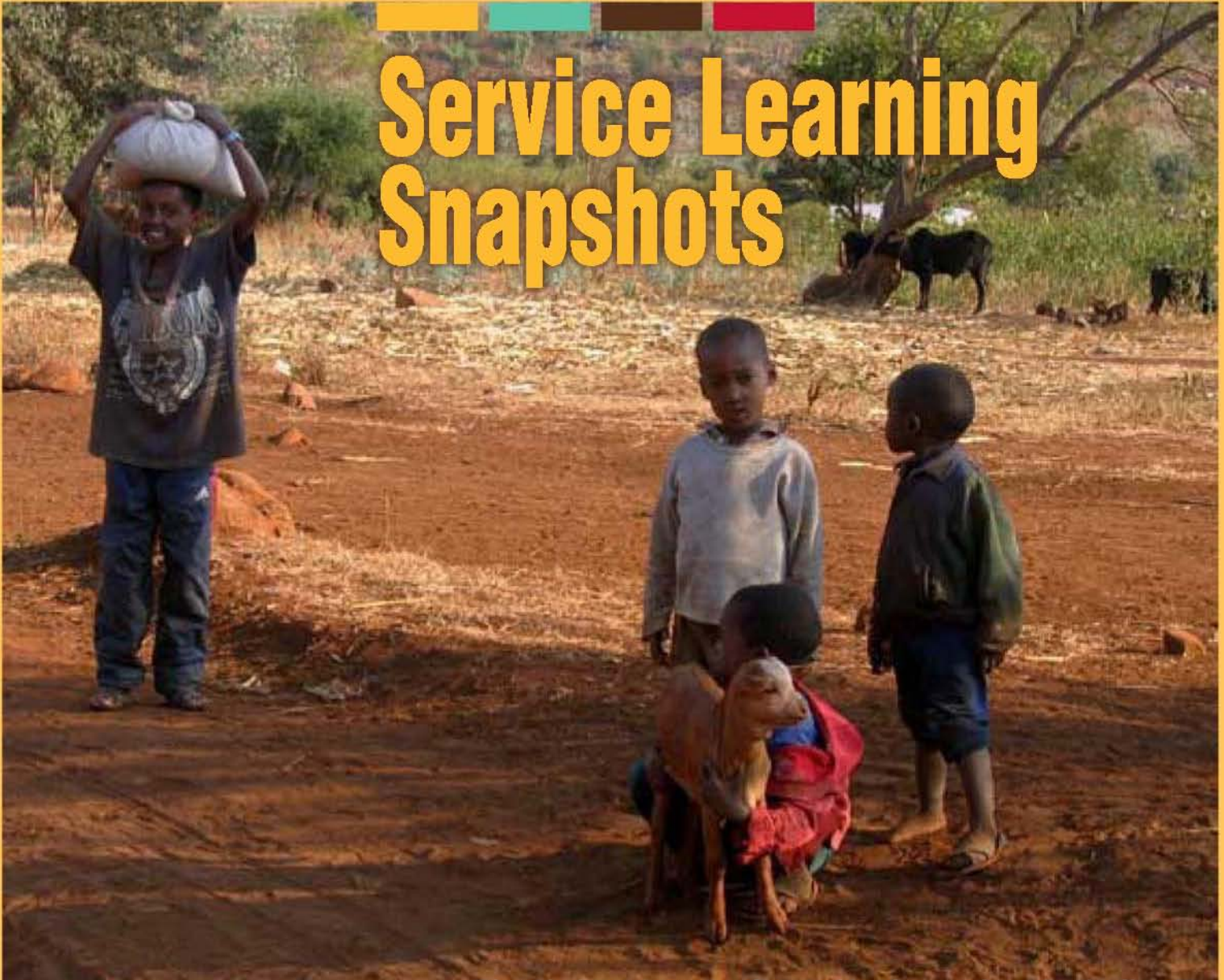
materials to support service learning in grades K-12, higher education, community-based initiatives, tribal programs, and programs for the general public.

[www.WaterPlanetChallenge.org](http://www.WaterPlanetChallenge.org) EarthEcho International's Water Planet Challenge engages middle and high school youth with science-based environmental education materials, tools, and resources to take action that restores and protects our water planet.

[www.YSA.org](http://www.YSA.org) Sign up for the weekly briefings from Youth Service America and keep up with grant opportunities and plans for Global Youth Service Day.

Cathryn Berger Kaye, M.A. is the author of *The Complete Guide to Service Learning: Proven, Practical Ways to Engage Students in Civic Responsibility, Academic Curriculum, & Social Action Second Edition* (Free Spirit Publishing, March 2010) and the *Service Learning for Kids*

# Service Learning Snapshots



This and far right photos courtesy: Students of Awet Secondary School, Kamla ya Simba, TZ

# The Five Stages of Service Learning



series (Free Spirit Publishing). Her newest book *Going Blue: A Teen Guide to Saving Our Oceans and Waterways* (Free Spirit Publishing) written with Philippe Cousteau and EarthEcho International will be available in September, 2010. She can be reached at [cbkaye@aol.com](mailto:cbkaye@aol.com).

**Note:** Documents for conducting Personal Inventory, Gathering Information About a Community Need, and Planning for Service Learning from Cathryn Berger Kaye's book *The Complete Guide to Service Learning: Proven, Practical Ways to Engage Students in Civic Responsibility, Academic Curriculum, & Social Action* Second Edition (March 2010) have been generously provided by her publisher, Free Spirit Publishing ([www.freespirit.com](http://www.freespirit.com)) and are available on our website.

As students follow this service learning process, they move from initiative through implementation and share the results, while participating in ongoing reflection.

**Investigation:** In pairs, students conduct a *Personal Inventory* by interviewing their peers to find out the interests, skills, and talents of the group and draw upon these as they move through all the Stages. Students conduct action research to learn more about the community need.

**Preparation and Planning:** With an authenticated need, students learn about the topic through a range of academic experiences that integrate critical thinking and social analysis and grow to understand the underlying problem. This leads to shaping their planned

response, often with community partners.

**Action:** All participants implement their plans to meet the community need or contribute to the common good. The action most often looks like direct service, advocacy, indirect service, or research, or a combination of these.

**Reflection:** At each stage, students consider how the experience, knowledge, and skills they are acquiring relate to their own lives and their community. The process includes cognitive and affective response.

**Demonstration:** Students provide evidence to others about of their influence and accomplishments. They also showcase what and how they learned and their acquired skills and knowledge.



Photos courtesy: Wayne-Westland Schools

Lincoln Elementary students plant trees to improve water quality of the Rouge River.

## Planting for Our Rivers

Hands-on learning gained new meaning when fourth-grade students at Lincoln Elementary in the Wayne-Westland School District in Westland, Michigan, planted six trees as part of a service learning experience called "Rooting for the Rouge." The trees will help keep excessive storm water runoff and pollutants out of the Rouge River. This partnership in water quality involved local cities and schools with teachers and students learning from staff in the building and grounds department. Students studied local water quality and tree varieties, labeled storm drains while covering benchmarks and standards in language arts, science, social studies, and life skills, and educated their community. As a student explains, "We voted on which trees to plant. We all took turns putting things on the trees like dirt, mulch, and the woodchips. Best of all, the planting helped make the Rouge River cleaner."

## Understanding Poverty

At Einstein Middle School in Seattle, Washington, 120 eighth graders did more than read about poverty. In English class, they read *Stake's Limbo*, a novel about a boy living on the streets. Students in math classes looked at the financial side of poverty, for example, costs associated with housing and employment statistics. And in science classes, students learned about the effects of poverty on health, from malnutrition to inadequate medical attention. They then led an Oxfam Hunger Banquet during which their peers were placed in groups and fed different meals based on actual world hunger statistics. Guest speakers talked about poverty in their community. Knowing this background, students volunteered in downtown Seattle agencies preparing and serving food, giving pedicures, and collecting needed hygiene supplies. Students next wrote reports, published zines, created digital video, and conducted an evening exhibition to extend their outreach. Visit [www.hungerbanquet.org](http://www.hungerbanquet.org) for more information about the Oxfam Hunger Banquet.

## A Global Village

In a world of digital technology and designer coffee, the 5,000 residents of Kambi ya Simba, Tanzania, illuminate the night with lanterns and drink from streams and pumps that often carry illness. And yet, equipped with digital cameras and tape recorders, and with assistance from the U.S.-based nonprofit What Kids Can Do, 350 students at Awet Secondary School documented daily life in their village. They held cameras and tape recorders for the first time. They reflected on their work saying: "It stretched our imagination in so many ways. Before this, we had never seen a book with photographs. Of the larger world, we know only what our teachers have told us." Their

book, *In Our Village* has been read by over 30,000 students around the world. As a result of their book sales, students have received



Awet Secondary School students in Simba, Tanzania, participating in their documentary "In Our Village."

scholarships to continue their education. Visit [www.inourvillage.org](http://www.inourvillage.org) to learn more and participate in the In Our Global Village project.

## Giant Steps for Animals

At Giant Steps of St. Louis, children with autism heard about the needs of The Shannon Foundation, a nearby wildlife rescue farm. Learning gained an additional purpose. Students began a dog biscuit company to raise needed funds (math and science). They also collected and learned how to fold needed blankets (life skills) and practiced animal care so on their visits they could help with grooming the dogs (personal safety). This ongoing commitment has helped students apply newfound skills while taking part in their community.