
SERVICE LEARNING AND PARENT EMPOWERMENT

Millikan Middle School

Sherman, California

A year and an half ago, Millikan Middle School held a retreat for parents, students, teachers, administrators, and agency staff to explore the potential partnership between service learning and family involvement. Service learning is an innovative educational strategy where students learn their curriculum by implementing meaningful community projects. Students investigate and reflect upon social issues to develop a project that matches community needs. They implement the project and then evaluate their experience and the impact the project had on the community. For Millikan Middle School, service learning became an ideal partnership program between students, teachers, and the Family Center program.

In the fall of 2001, the school became one of only a few public schools in California to receive a grant to implement service learning. California had just proclaimed a new state holiday—Cesar Chavez Day of Service and Learning—and offered grants for communities to develop service learning projects for youth. The school hired one of the parent leaders to help coordinate the grant. After viewing the video about how farm workers had suffered and then become empowered by the leadership of Cesar Chavez, students brainstormed issues that their own families and communities faced. In one health science class, student issues included health and nutrition, workers' rights, and child labor laws. Many students felt that their parents had faced or were facing similar problems as the farm workers who worked with Cesar Chavez. As one project, students produced educational displays that were placed in the Family Center and shared with their parents during Open House.

In another classroom, over 150 students developed storybooks about their families, school, and community to use in a literacy project for parents in the Family Center. In these stories, students interviewed their parents, relatives, neighbors, and community leaders. They also wrote about services at local churches, the surgical team at a hospital, graffiti, their best friends, and their favorite teachers and activities at the school.

On Cesar Chavez Day, March 31, the entire community came together for a celebration. Students, parents, community members, and school staff planted trees and flowers in the community garden as students from the Performing Arts Magnet danced, sang, and played instruments for entertainment. The day also featured the grand opening of the school's new

family center and an opening ceremony by Anthony Chavez, the grandson of Cesar Chavez. At the end of the school year, the school created a youth leadership group to lead the development of service learning projects for the next school year.

Service learning is a great process for parents and students to engage in together. The school has begun to witness that a true sense of learning community grows when students and adults work together to uplift their community. Students excel academically when they apply their knowledge to real world situations, and parents contribute their own talents and insights to the process as well.

The 2001 school year ended with a partnership retreat at a spiritual retreat site. Parents, student leaders, teachers, administrators, and agency staff brainstormed about a group of students and families who have been traditionally neglected at the school. This group primarily consists of English Language Learners (ELL) who have difficulty transitioning to English classrooms, and are in danger of dropping out of high school. Retreat participants discussed bringing the ELL classroom into the Family Center and the Family Center into the classroom, sharing service learning projects and educational programs, and providing a space in the Family Center for parents, teachers and students to learn creatively together. The group decided to focus its efforts on this population of students and their families next year. They plan to involve these students in service learning projects and the student leadership class so that the students can share their talents and knowledge. The group also plans to recruit the parents of these students to become volunteers and to develop support programs in tutoring and services through the Family Center.

The school has parent leaders, youth leaders, and committed teachers who understand the benefit of integrating parent and family involvement with service learning. They have clear goals about united efforts to support the most underserved students and their families, while providing a great learning environment for the betterment of all students and their families.

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