

Service Learning Builds Bonds to School for Young Learners

Service learning can be adapted to early childhood and can help children build early and enduring connections with schools and communities.

By Teddy Gross

Gavin is an articulate and amiable young man from Newark, New Jersey, who dropped out of high school five years ago. He recently started to piece his life together by enrolling in a GED program. We met at a national education conference in Washington, D.C., and during a break, I asked him when school started to fail him.

Gavin was surprised by the question.

“No one’s ever asked me that before,” he said. He thought a moment, then answered, “Third grade. The teacher gave us a test, and I knew it wasn’t about me. But it got worse in 5th grade. That’s when I vowed to quit school the day I turned 16.”

“Did you?” I asked.

“It was a Saturday, so I couldn’t.” Then, he flashed a big smile, “But two days later, I did!”

Gavin and I met at a conference where the topic was the dropout “epidemic,” and the young man’s story sadly illustrates the aptness of the viral metaphor. Every year, a third of all American students quit school or fail to graduate — damning evidence of a virulent national disease. But Gavin’s childhood recollections also reveal that the epidemiological metaphor is



Photo courtesy Julie Cavanagh

Students at P.S. 15, an elementary school in Brooklyn, New York, learn math as they sort, count, and graph the pennies that students in their class collected during the Penny Harvest.

misleading. Far from being a pathogen that suddenly attacks its victim in adolescence, causing him to break his bond with school, Gavin's case reveals a disaffection that festered for nearly a decade before he became a data point. The boy hated school for years, and he survived by counting the days until he could quit because he never bonded with school in the first place.

This failure to bond with school at an early age is alarmingly commonplace. Schools generally work well for children who come through their doors wanting to learn and knowing how. Most such children, even the poorest performers, will move along and may even develop a love of learning. But children who arrive with no experience at following a learning objective and without cooperative values will find school a cold and coercive place, and they may never bond with it.

To make matters worse, these children will also find that, despite having come to a learning institution, the very attitudes and skills they need — wanting to learn and knowing how — are just what schools either don't want to teach or don't know how to teach.

Now, some good news. In my work, I've found that service learning, which in recent decades has evolved into an effective pedagogy for secondary and postsecondary education, can be adapted to early childhood and can crucially help children build early and enduring bonds with school. Famously touted as a curriculum-enhancement strategy because it engagingly adds both experiential and ethical dimensions to classroom content, service learning can also help young children develop the foundation for a healthy student identity by tapping into and satisfying certain instinctual cravings. For many years, my work has focused on refining a year-long application of service learning called the Penny Harvest, which operates in 1,000 schools nationwide. The benefits I've seen speak to the value of the method.

Developing commitment and values. In the home environment, attentive parents help infants and children learn to exchange impulsive behavior for goal-based discipline by selectively praising certain expressive behaviors as the child's "special talents," which rewards them with a highly desirable sense of individuality. Well-designed service learning can cultivate the same sense of commitment by emphasizing the unique talents of youth *as a generation*. For instance, who can hunt for pennies most effectively? Who is best at cheering up the elderly?

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Such designs can also help children exchange selfish conduct for cooperative values by rewarding their genuine expressions of empathy. When a child renders service to another and hears public praise for that, his or her sense of belonging to the community is enhanced. In addition to building a bond to the community, the recognition of that service also reinforces the ethical standards necessary to maintain the bond.

When service learning captures the generational aspirations of the young, recognizes their empathic imagination, and manages to be intellectually challenging, it delivers a remarkable trifecta of bonding benefits: a sense of identity, belonging, and accomplishment.

Help children bond with school by fortifying, through service learning, a love of themselves, of others, and of learning.

Establishing trust. Since learning requires the willing relinquishment of ignorance, it's often an act of courage too risky for the open classroom in front of teacher and peers. Many teachers labor mightily to win students' trust, only to watch it vanish under the pressure of persistent performance testing (remember Gavin). Answering the call of service can build a sense of trust, since working together on a social problem involves both shared intentions and performance. What's more, in such settings, no one is always right, least of all the teacher. Most important, in a world cursed by darkness, the one with light is king. This inescapable fact, true for all real-world situations, can't help but build a child's all-important trust in rationality, knowledge, and skills — and whoever possesses them.

De-fragmenting communities. Finally, service learning can start the bonding process with school by introducing more helpful adults into the educational equation. Service opens the classroom to the community and the community to the classroom. This increases the positive interactions between supportive adults and children and potentially reduces the punishing isolation that some children chronically suffer. This is especially true of service learning models that layer in cross-age mentoring, which is, quite possibly, the single most powerful application within our reach.

That said, my enthusiasm for service learning as an inoculant against disengagement must be balanced by three limiting factors.

First, the priorities of the education community lie elsewhere. The notion of dropout prevention currently applies to interventions in middle school, while our tragic losses in the primary grades are the dirty little secret no one wants to hear about. Sec-

ond, as shown by recent data from the Corporation for National and Community Service, there's a corresponding prejudice against experiential education among primary school principals. Third and most punishing, most service learning models have proved impossible to scale. Year after year, certain talented teachers will deepen their practice, but the method obdurately refuses to spread.

These problems loom large, but they can be over-

come. The success of Common Cents with the Penny Harvest suggests that it's possible to help children bond with school by fortifying, through service learning, a love of themselves, of others, and of learning. It also suggests that, by opening a second front against the dropout epidemic, we may actually succeed in making the first 10 years of school so meaningful that students will willingly sign up for another 10. **K**

Making the Most of a Penny

The Penny Harvest idea takes two very small entities — the youngest of our children and the lowly U.S. penny — and magnifies their contributions. Organized by their schools, children collect pennies from their neighbors and friends and then put the pennies to work helping those in need.

Each participating Penny Harvest school works to collect 25 thirty-pound bags of pennies — about \$1,000 worth of pennies. Each school then receives this amount for its student-run Philanthropy Roundtable. This group, comprising a boy and a girl from each 4th- and 5th-grade classroom, leads the process of identifying community needs and developing an action plan for using their resources to meet those needs. Roundtable members gather ideas from all the grades, take the skills and interests of the student population into account, and consider the resources they'll need for the work to succeed. With their adult coaches, they make sure their plans address real needs in a realistic fashion.

According to Julie Cavanagh, the Penny Harvest coach at P.S. 15, an elementary school in Brooklyn, children who collect millions upon millions of pennies each year are dramatically empowered by their actions.

Most P.S. 15 students come from a large housing project. The student population is roughly half black, half Hispanic. Every student is eligible for free or reduced-price meals. About 90% come from homes headed by a single parent or single grandparent. But their involvement in Penny Harvest galvanizes them, both for learning and for service. "These children certainly qualify as being in need, but they don't think of themselves that way. They take their energy and focus it on people or animals or causes that they see as having greater needs than theirs. The kindergartners, especially, get very excited by the idea that they can help — that they actually have the power to do that," Cavanagh said.

They also connect their actions to the school curriculum. "We pull from math, of course, and from reading and writing. Social studies classes talk about communities from local to global levels. We teach conflict resolution, too, since the students have to reach agreement about the work, and this takes compromise," Cavanagh said.

In 2007, P.S. 15 chose to support the environment, which students did by working with Prospect Park Zoo on protecting endangered species, by creating Green Festivals for every grade in the school, and by developing a wild bird habitat on school grounds. P.S. 15's Roundtable calculated that this work would cost more than they had on hand, so they applied for mini-grants from appropriate organizations, wrote letters to government and community leaders, and succeeded in raising the balance of the funds they needed.

Because most of these students are at serious risk of dropping out before they even reach high school, "we have to engage them, and service learning is a great tool for that," Cavanagh said. She tells the story of one boy in particular. "He was very challenging, the toughest student I've ever had, always fighting, nothing nice to say." But when he visited Rockefeller Center and saw the enormous field of pennies collected by the schools participating in the New York City Penny Harvest, something clicked. He said he could finally see that a penny he might leave lying

on the sidewalk could make a difference if it's joined by many others. He could recognize that a single act of service could multiply in the same way.

At P.S. 15, where so many students live so close to the edge, Cavanagh keeps the focus on this kind of empowerment. "It's so important for these children to feel

powerful in a culture that isn't designed for them, whose educational structure doesn't meet their needs, where nothing is on their terms. That *denies* them power. Service learning shows them how they can acquire it," she said.

— Caryn Pernu and Kate Maloy



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Today, Common Cents operates the Penny Harvest in schools in New York City, the Capital District of New York, Florida, Colorado, and Seattle. During the 2008-09 school year, Penny Harvest students across the country collectively raised \$811,626 in pennies.

File Name and Bibliographic Information

k1002gro.pdf

Teddy Gross, Service Learning Builds Bonds to School for Young Learners, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 91, No. 5, February 2010, pp. 24-26.

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