



SERVICE *Learning*

Students from Providence Day School participate in a creek clean up as part of a service project. Courtesy of Providence Day School

**Education that transforms communities,
students beyond the classroom**

BY LIZ ROTHHAUS BERTRAND

When Providence Day School teacher Dr. Jennifer Bratianski's mentions 2016 grad Grant Williams, her voice suddenly catches: "Awesome, knuckleheaded kid," she says.

Bratianski's proud. Not only because Williams excelled as a student and basketball player at the University of Tennessee nor because he was recently drafted by the Boston Celtics. What makes her emotional is the way the 6-foot-7-inch power forward stood up for teammates and other athletes at Tennessee a couple years ago.

When Williams noticed there were fewer healthy food options available during the summer to student athletes training on campus, he contacted the school's new athletic director and advocated for change. Because of his efforts, the university implemented a healthy grab-and-go breakfast option for

student athletes.

That's the power of service learning and just one of many examples of former students making a difference, says Bratianski, who serves as a community engagement coordinator for social responsibility at Providence Day School. "You're advocating for others who aren't advocating for themselves," she says.

Providence Day School is one of several local independent schools that include service learning as a key curriculum component. By connecting hands-on experiences "doing good" in the community to opportunities for learning, reflection and action, students develop a variety of skills. From facilitating a deeper understanding of the world to helping young people see the role they can play in improving it, service learning not only engages

students for the short term, it can transform them and their communities for good.

WHAT IS SERVICE LEARNING?

According to the National Youth Leadership Council, service learning is: "an approach to teaching and learning in which students use academic knowledge and skills to address genuine community needs."

Biology teacher Dr. Topher Gee, chair of Charlotte Latin School's Service Learning Committee, wants students to connect their service to a deeper understanding of why such action is necessary and the context around a particular challenge.

"The activities we do are important in themselves, of course, but we also want [students] to develop the awareness, to be able to learn about what actually will make a difference, what will matter in

their community, think critically about that and understand how to move forward to [make] change."

FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE COMMUNITY

At Trinity Episcopal School, each grade level dedicates classroom time to exploring a particular challenge with the help of a community partner.

"It's a deeply integrated program and defines a lot of the culture at the school," says Dr. Katherine Addison, a local pediatrician who has two daughters currently enrolled at Trinity and a third child who is an alumna of the program.

She recalls her oldest daughter Kate's first-grade class project years ago, a canned-food drive benefiting Loaves & Fishes. The project initially rolled out the way you might expect with students putting up posters and enthusiastically urging parents

and neighbors to donate. The cans were then used in unique ways in the classroom, as students learned about healthy eating, practiced reading the nutrients on labels and kept track of the total number collected. But then they went a step further. The children piled the cans on to little red wagons and walked several blocks to deliver the food, visiting the food pantry and seeing first-hand how their contributions would help neighbors in need.

“To explain hunger to a first grader who has never been hungry is really hard,” Addison says. “It was a really meaningful experience that even a 6-year-old can wrap their mind around. When you teach something to a child at a very early age, it simply becomes part of who they are.”

At Providence Day School, service learning is also woven through the entire curriculum, from prekindergarten through high school. Faculty social responsibility coordinators ensure service learning is age appropriate and that there is continuity between the curriculum in the lower, middle and high school levels. While the youngest kids focus on developing gratitude and empathy, service learning becomes progressively more participatory as students move through middle school. By high school, students are deeply engaged in exploring many issues that impede community development and trying to implement innovative solutions. These actions take many forms — like the environmental studies class that grows seedlings each spring to support Friendship Gardens, a network of community gardens providing fresh food to people in need.

For Reverend Lindsey Peery, lower school dean of community life and chaplain at Trinity Episcopal School, this element of student agency is key. She notes how third grade students spend the year volunteering for Urban Ministry Center, getting to know neighbors who have struggled with homelessness. Students then write letters to city council members about what they have learned regarding homelessness, affordable housing and ways to help their neighbors.

Students discover: “Even though we’re kids, even though we’re third graders we can do something,” Peery says.

TRANSFORMING PERCEPTIONS

Emory Brinson, a senior at South Mecklenburg High School, and alumna of Trinity Episcopal School remembers putting her own spin on a school project her eighth-grade year. As students collected coats for Hope Haven, an organization serving people transitioning out of homelessness and substance abuse, she suggested they write and place notes of encouragement in the pocket of each donated coat “so [recipients] could get warmth from a different source.” Inspired by this and other experiences at Trinity Episcopal, Brinson continues to seek out opportunities to serve her school and the community.

Building relationships with people who have different life experiences and needs, can also transform students’ perceptions of the world, Peery says. After spending time with adults with disabilities through a partnership with Inreach, second graders at Trinity



Classes at Trinity Episcopal School pair with local nonprofits each year for ongoing service projects. Courtesy of Trinity Episcopal School

Episcopal start asking important questions like, is our school handicapped accessible?

“They really begin to understand ... that difference doesn’t have to be something you’re scared of,” Peery says.

INSPIRING STUDENTS AND BUILDING SCHOOL COMMUNITY

At Charlotte Latin School, service learning also is incorporated at each grade level. While there is no formal requirement for graduates, upper school students are encouraged to log service hours and reflect on their efforts. The 2019 senior class contributed more than 9,000 hours of community service.

To help students recruit volunteers, the upper school hosts a service fair each fall. There currently are more than 20 different student-led projects from which to choose.

“We look for ways to have students lead. It’s not just I’m

your teacher and we’re going to do this,” Gee says.

There also are projects that encourage direct collaboration between older and younger students. For example, upper school students visited individual classrooms in the lower school to read a story about a girl who discovers her friend doesn’t have enough to eat, and her efforts to solve the problem by herself. The students then lead conversations on the story’s themes and lessons.

“We hope that through the things we have students do while they’re here that they’ll develop an awareness of their own agency and ability to make a positive difference in the world,” Gee says.

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