How Are Educators Teaching What Really Matters for Developing Lifelong Learning In Our Students?

Theresa Udziela
Forest Ridge School District

Today’s educators are increasingly being called upon to cover more content and material in their classrooms. Teachers and students find that each day is full—with not a minute to spare.

The number of standards has increased in the core subject areas. Technology initiatives have been introduced to better assist students in their competitive pursuit of College and Career Readiness skills. Then add mandated Social Emotional Learning standards to assist the students in developing their “soft skills.” Now match this with limited availability in many school districts across the nation of encore classes in the Humanities.

Is this what our students really need?

Are we focusing on the mile-wide-and-inch deep cliché that gives our students exposure to content that they remember short term for the tests—and then promptly forget? Or are we truly instilling in them the skills and processes necessary to have a balanced and meaningful educational experience that provides the promised foundation of lifelong learning?

The Case of Forest Ridge School District

As a veteran educator of over 20 years, I have worked in a variety of capacities supporting student achievement and career development in Forest Ridge School District (FRSD). The district is located outside of Chicago in the small, blue-collar, bedroom community of Oak Forest, Illinois.

I have taught various curricula over the years within the district. My experiences have ranged from teaching fourth grade to teaching middle school. My work in education is not my only frame of reference, however. I am also the mother of two children who have—and who are—experiencing the very situations that I will be addressing in this paper.

My current position as Applied Technology and 21st Century Careers instructor affords me the opportunity to work with students as they explore a variety of topics and interests in relation to their future careers and the world of work. These topics range over a wide domain of practical skills, including web design, audio and video production, forensic science, computer graphics, and computer animation, to name a few.

Being a part of the Encore Department for as many years as I have, it is not uncommon for me to have students and their parents approach me about how they can take my classes. Unfortunately, due to our school scheduling structure, students who are in advanced or remedial classes, or who take band, choir, or a world language, cannot fit another elective into their schedule.

This is not just the case at the middle school. At our high school, students that have chosen to be in band must forgo lunch if taking another elective. Additionally, the amount of Advanced Placement (AP) courses that students are looking to utilize for college entry can be overwhelming, especially when condensed into their last years of high school. These practices have been in place for a long time. They continue to have to choose—one passion for
another, or what they think they will need for what they think they might yet want to explore.

And I know this as a mother, too. In the case of my son, he had a penchant for foreign languages. In his earliest years of education, he participated in an afterschool Spanish program. But after three years, the program no longer was offered. Eventually, he was able to register for Spanish classes at a local community college. Schedule went something like this: straight from the afterschool activities, a 45-minute car ride, in class for 3 hours, and then middle school homework completed early the next morning.

Repeat for the entire semester.

Now, many years later, he seeks entry into medical school. And this process further exemplifies the competitive nature of schooling, which pits applicant against applicant. His desire to serve others might quickly be lost among the applications, credentials, and procedures needed for gaining admittance.

Are students being herded through their education without a say in what they learn, when they learn it, or, most importantly, why they seek to learn it? What are we after here?

What Drives Us?

The purpose behind getting a good education seems to have shifted over the years. One of the key categories identified in the Common Core Standards is the College and Career Readiness Skills. It surmises that most, if not all, students should be prepared to go to college.

If a young person wants to get a good job, make money, and be successful by societal standards, then college is the best option. But which college? Not just any old college will do, for many families the prestige of the college comes with bragging rights. There are those that want to attend high profile and prestigious colleges such as the Ivies.

But why?

Is it the quality of the program or is it the notoriety that comes with it? Our students know what they have been taught. They know what will look best on their resume. This has been engrained in them at earlier and earlier ages. How many clubs do they participate in? What are their grades like? Are they a member of a scholastic honor society?

We award these students with certificates of achievement and recognize their class rank. To what end?

School systems are grooming them for the competitive journey and the “resume race” that they will undergo in high school, in higher education, and on their way into the world of work. However, are these resume builders what will inspire our students to explore their interests?

Increasingly, the application process of higher education further perpetuates competition and self-promotion, not only in terms of what applicants must do and show, but also in terms of how institutions themselves demonstrate their values—competing for ever greater number of applicants, many of whom will be denied entry to improve “selectivity” ratings.

What’s the pay off?

I wonder about those students who are not destined for college or who have not mastered a particular skill in the same time frame as their peers. The resulting competitive atmosphere is having a divisive and negative effect on the youth of today, both academically and mentally. It is not hard to see that, as a society, there has been an increase in self-promotion. “Success” seems to increasingly demand it.

We return, then, to an age-old question: How do we prepare the young for their futures, in ways that promote social harmony and peace?

Bringing it Back to What Really Matters
The Fetzer Institute is a foundation in Kalamazoo, Michigan, devoted to “helping build the spiritual foundation for a loving world.” In 1994, researchers, educators, and child advocates met there to discuss some of their concerns. Of particular interest was the question of how youth programs might be better aligned to school curricula.

From this, the Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was founded. The group looked to identify the social and emotional needs of students and better understand how these needs impacted student learning. In 1997, CASEL worked with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) to publish the book, *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators.*

Illinois was among the first states to develop Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards for grades K-12 in the United States and, as such, emerged as a leader in the SEL movement. The passage of the *Illinois Children’s Mental Health Act of 2003* further supported the charge for Illinois schools to consider social and emotional learning as an important part of the school mission.

Through the framework of the Illinois SEL standards, it was hoped educators would be supported in establishing safe and caring learning environments by assisting students in working with one another in a respectful manner. A key component of such work was the service learning curriculum.

---

1 Please see [http://www.casel.org/history/](http://www.casel.org/history/).

---

**Service Can Begin at an Early Age**

I have often overheard it said that children are too young to do service for others. I disagree. There are ways in which we can instill the desire to serve others in young children. The key is for students to make a connection in what or for whom they are doing the service.

For example, in many schools around our area, we collect pop tabs from aluminum cans for the Ronald McDonald House Charities. It is often a classroom event. Schools, in turn, sponsor competitions for the class that can collect the most pop tabs. This is something that students of any age can assist with and encourage their families, friends, and neighbors to help with as well.

Such competitions are perhaps better than nothing. Yet for the service to be educative, it is important that children fully understand what the final result is. Not just how many boxes or pounds they could collect, but what those pop tabs collected mean for the families and the children that will benefit from them. As I see it, a major negative of many service projects is that there is a reward at the end of the collection that may be disconnected to the process.

The purpose of the collection is to collect tabs that can be recycled for cash to provide housing and meals for families of sick children. Instead of exploring the social impact of illness and the stories of families struggling with it, collecting and turning in pop tabs is rewarded by a pizza or ice cream party. Children as young as first grade are smart enough to understand what it means to be sick. They understand wanting to have a parent with them. The social meaning of service is lost when a reward is attached—and its educative potential thereby greatly diminished.

As students get older, the requirements for service to school, community, and religious affiliations often increases. Whether it is for reli-
gious education, scouts, or school groups, educators are often asked if they can provide opportunities for students to complete service hours. Of course, there is a never-ending list of things around the school building that students could assist with and most educators are willing to oblige.

Service and consideration for others, therefore, does not always need to be outside of the school setting. Students can benefit by working with individuals within the school or classroom. In the Danielson Framework for Teaching that is used around the state of Illinois for teacher evaluation, Domain Two focuses on the classroom environment. Across the various components, teachers strive to create an environment of respect, where students feel that there is a sense of care.

While some would question the fact that having students helping one another in the classroom does not qualify as “service,” I disagree. The fact that a student will take the time, of their own initiative, to assist another student who is struggling demonstrates an understanding of service. Students in my school can be seen assisting others in the halls in a variety of ways, assisting a locker partner in opening their locker, helping a student on crutches, or by being a new student helper. These actions, often accompanied by intrinsic satisfaction, contribute to a stronger sense of self and purpose while contributing to the greater good.

One of the misconceptions of service is that it must be measurable by a length of time—that it must be able to go onto a resume. In this way, the concept of service is diluted by the fact that individuals are counting the minutes of service completed, and perhaps not truly focusing on the purpose of the service and the benefit to others around them.

Service to School

As an educator, providing opportunities for students to experience service and be a contributing member of their community has always been an important focus for me. There are the opportunities to experience the satisfaction of helping or sharing their talents with others in class. But students can also take advantage of a number of other curricular projects.

One such project came about after the construction of an addition to an existing district school building. An inner courtyard was formed with the building expansion in the district middle school. No plans existed for completion of the courtyard. Inner courtyard reconstruction and maintenance is therefore one project that students have taken part in. A landscape architect from the community volunteered to work with the middle school students to design an outdoor classroom space, utilizing existing plants and landscape structures. Students benefited from this project through working not only with the landscape architect, but also with a landscape material supplier.

In an effort to pay for the project, the students utilized recycling of aluminum cans to assist in paying for the cost of the materials and supplies. Plant donations from families and the eighth grade class gift, a flowering pear tree,
rounded out the landscape foliage—plants that continues to thrive today.

The reconstruction project lasted for eight months. Approximately 65 students and parents worked throughout the week and on weekends to dig out tree roots, move landscape block, transplant plants, and haul dirt to fill in and level the area. This project, while complete in theory, continues to provide opportunities for students to upkeep and maintain. With the addition of a multi-level pond, and eight large cement benches, the outdoor space has been transformed into an outdoor classroom where students are proud to share what they have done with their peers.

Through continued student, parent, and staff dedication and hard work, this space has become an extension of the learning environment—rather than an enclosed storage space devoid of access for student use. The opportunity for students to work alongside their peers, parents, and staff members, while sharing a common interest, worked to further their passion and improve their abilities to collaborate, communicate, and problem solve, all while making a lasting contribution to their school community.

**Service to Community**

Another way students are often introduced to service at an early age is through school food drives, often around the holidays, for families in need. These drives, again, often focus around a competition, are organized by adults, and there is often a reward for the most food cans collected. Yet as educators in schools, we need to strive to make the service meaningful and encourage students to make a connection with the purpose and reality of what and why they are donating.

Common discussions that take place prior to these types of food drives should point out that it is not about taking the items that are at the back of the cabinet or what the family is not eating. Research is needed about who uses a food pantry—what types of food do they eat, what health and dietary restrictions do they face, and what holidays do they celebrate? By assisting students in understanding what their contributions might mean to a family in need, it will allow them to see how they can positively impact others. In doing so, they learn about the relationships that sustain the human community, and hopefully gain a sense of satisfaction, confidence, and the means for personal growth.

As students in our district become older, they have the opportunity to extend their level
of service to the community through serving as part of a food team at a local homeless shelter. The food team, originally organized by the teachers’ union local, has expanded to including students, parents, family members, and staff from all of the district’s schools. Students, parents, family members, and staff sign-up not only to work preparing the breakfast, but also in providing the food each month.

The monthly opportunity allows students to make a connection with the purpose of their service. It not only helps others, but it also makes a lasting impact on them. When they walk down the aisle created by mattresses and personal belongings at 5:30 in the morning, they are given a lasting visual image of what it means to be homeless. Then the real work begins. Breakfast needs to be served to the guests. They often number 75 a night, October through April.

Students are set to work preparing, cooking, and serving the guests breakfast. They also provide them a sack lunch before they head out for the day. The ability to make a personal connection with the families and receive their gratitude cannot be experienced by a canned food drive donation.

The impact of this service opportunity on the students in the middle school has extended to their families. Each year, we expand our impact through ever more individuals wanting to participate or through students who return even after they have left the middle school. Service can be transformational not just for those who are served.

**Taking Service to the Next Level**

In talking to other educators, we are always looking for ways to expand ideas for what we do in the classroom. Service is no exception.

In talking to a colleague about what his area of instruction is, I was introduced to a new program of service that is in place at John Hersey High School in Arlington Heights, Illinois. The program, Service Over Self (S.O.S.) has been in place since 1969, founded by Wil “Koz” Kozlowski.

According to Mark Gunther, the program’s current leader, “Koz felt that high school students were our ‘nation’s greatest untapped resource.’” Gunther also describes the S.O.S. program as one of the “oldest and most prized organizations of our school.”

To say that service is a dominant interest at Hersey High School is an understatement. According to Gunther, the club attracts over 300 members each year and has been expanded into a leadership class as part of the curriculum. This course serves 30-40 students over the
course of two semesters to provide students the opportunity to experience hands-on leadership through planning and carrying out service events. In the words of Mark Gunther:

Over the past 18 years, I have built upon Koz's club concept through the inclusion of the leadership class. The leadership class is organized by semester and is differentiated by the projects offered during that semester. Students can enroll in one semester or both semesters. Typically, 60-plus students demonstrate interest in the leadership class, but only 30 students are enrolled. A lottery is held to determine the students that enter the class. I believe that managing 40-plus projects and events per year and one leadership class is the most effective way to coordinate our mission. We have discussed having two leadership classes per semester but negatives outweigh the positives in terms of effectively coordinating and synergizing our efforts.

When I first took over the SOS program, I personally planned and organized all of our projects and efforts. In many ways, this was more efficient than enlisting the efforts and skills of my students because I knew very clearly the status of each moving part of the projects. The biggest and most rewarding challenge was giving up control of the projects to the students. I have to allow students to work at their pace (to a degree), make their own decisions, and apply their problem-solving skills. These are high school students with a lot on their plates beyond this course. Also, this may be the first time they are actually leading a project. So, it can get messy, inefficient, and at times, unprofessional. We can have 15 projects going on at once! I have learned to live with the cumbersome delegation of work to students because the net result is far greater and more impactful on the student. Empowering the students to make real decisions is the key to the whole course. They leave with the confidence of real experience that they can plan and execute a project from start to finish. I often hear from students in exit interviews that they knew they were in a leadership class, but they had no idea they were actually going to lead so much. Comments like this give me faith that the way the class is organized is just right. I heard a great quote once, “school is place where young people go to watch old people work.” On behalf of us “old people,” I take revenge on the youth!

While Hersey boasted a robust service club under Kozlowski, Gunther's research found that student volunteerism dropped when they got to college. This can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the increased rigors of the college experience as well as to students not being able to create service projects on their own. They simply lacked the experience of leadership. The creation of a leadership class was a response to challenge that trend. Now, students can join the SOS Club as participants in service and/or enroll in the SOS class to gain hands-on leadership experiences! All are welcome!
Conclusion

Empowering students to grow through serve to others is key in assisting students to become contributing members of society. This can be a challenge in the competitive world of schooling. In an environment of high-stakes testing and where competition to excel in order to create the best resumes, get into the best colleges, and obtain the best jobs that make the most money, the task can be daunting.

The Illinois SEL standards are a framework that provides direction in developing the social and emotional well-being of our students. I believe, as educators, we have the ability to impact our students, day in and day out, in the opportunities we provide.

To do this, we should not put a measure on the time, nor the amount of service. Instead, we should emphasize the purpose and benefits to self and society by completing service. Indeed, we want students to learn to see their own well-being as tied up with the well-being of others.

There is a need to further educate our parents and families of the district regarding the SEL standards and what they support and aim to teach. Credentialism, narrow competition, and mindless self-promotion are forces to be resisted. But by partnering with parents, community organizations, and school staff, we can provide a strong foundation—rooted in character and altruistic behaviors—that will ultimately support lifelong learning.

Theresa Udziela currently serves as the instructor of the Applied Technology and 21st Century Careers courses in Forest Ridge School District 142. She has presented at the National Careers Pathways Annual Conference, the Illinois Computing Educators Conference, South Suburban College, and has received recognition for technology excellence in the classroom. She credits her service-to-others mindset to her own parents, serving as role models in her youth. She continues to share that passion with the help of her husband and two children. Theresa is pursuing her doctorate in Education with a focus in Curriculum and Instruction at Aurora University, Illinois.