Healthy Neighborhoods, Healthy Kids, Altered Assumptions

The two small elementary schools in Burlington, Vt., are making a big difference through the Healthy Neighborhoods/Healthy Kids project. Five classrooms of fourth- and fifth-graders at Champlain Elementary and Lawrence Barnes Elementary, the project’s two pilot sites, are studying how their neighborhoods are designed, learning about the impact design has on residents’ health, and making changes for the better.

Students begin with the development of a quality of life index. As mini-community-planners, students begin by developing a quality-of-life index, answering the question, “What do we need to be healthy and successful in our community?” They look at specific development patterns such as sidewalks, places to recreate, and the safety of streets.

Based on that index, students develop a report card and begin collecting data to assess the quality of life in their neighborhood. “The neighborhoods are racially and economically diverse, and students begin to see how their classmates live and how neighborhoods look different,” said Jennifer Girillo, director of professional development at Shelburne Farms, Healthy Neighborhoods/Healthy Kids founding partner. This year, the project involves two neighborhoods in Burlington. In one, half the students qualify for free and reduced-priced lunch; in the other neighborhood, 100 percent qualify.

“They have to take into account varying points of view,” Girillo adds. “For instance, when students were looking at ‘safe streets,’ they evaluated crossing time at crosswalks, considering how long it would take for a student, elderly person, parent with a stroller, or person who uses a wheelchair to cross safely.”

Once the data is collected and analyzed, students present it to teachers, parents, city council members, the mayor, and community groups across the political, economic, and cultural spectrum to discuss how everyone can work together to make improvements. They develop and complete their service-learning projects in teams that are required to do their decision-making by consensus.

The project is integrated in science and social studies curriculum as well as the service-learning standard in Vermont. The yearlong curriculum is expanding to additional Vermont elementary and middle schools and is being translated for use in the Dominican Republic and China. “It is transferable and translatable. It has universal appeal,” Girillo adds. It has also been adapted for non-formal settings such as summer camps.

The increasing appeal is due in part to the positive program evaluation that is emerging. “We are finding that students are more interested in their homenplace — being good stewards not just of natural resources, but of human resources as well,” said Girillo.

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Online registration for the 20th annual National Service-Learning Conference is now open. Co-hosted by NYLC and Volunteer Tennessee, the conference takes place in Nashville, Tenn., March 18-21, 2009. It is the largest gathering of youth and practitioners involved in the service-learning movement.

For more information, please visit www.nylc.org/conference.