

Literacy

Essential question: What can we do to improve literacy in our community?

School: Grover Washington Jr. Middle School, Philadelphia, PA

Year of project: 2005-2006

Ms. General's students returned to school wanting to focus their service-learning project on Hurricane Katrina. The catastrophe dominated the news in the last weeks of summer, and the students were eager to do something to help.

But Ms. General knew that choosing a local issue would give the class a chance to interact with children in need.

In addition, many students, like 8th grader Dante Peters, believed that “there are more problems in our neighborhood.” So, Ms. General suggested that students interview others in the community to find out what they could do to help children in Philadelphia.

The students talked with friends, family members, and teachers, and they learned that literacy is an important issue in their community. They found it to be of special concern among 5th grade teachers at their school, because many of the school's incoming 5th graders have difficulty reading. Since, as 8th grader Genesis Leal said, “reading is part of every day life and it is important for everybody,” the class's essential question became “What can we do to improve literacy in our community?”

As part of their project, they read *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself*, in which the author describes how, as a slave, he was denied the privilege of learning how to read and write.

The students also became interested in the connection between illiteracy and incarceration. They read letters from inmates at Graterford Prison in which men described how their feelings of failure in school led to truancy and, eventually, criminal activity.

Working with the Beacon Community Center at Grover Washington, Ms. General's students were each assigned a “bookworm buddy” from nearby Lowell Elementary School. The buddies met for a Literacy Fun Day in mid-May during which Ms. General's students read to kindergarten children from the books they wrote and designed and also led the children in various games and songs they had

created. As one 8th grader said, "I thought it would be hard, but it wasn't. It was easy. And it was fun."

The students feel confident their project will benefit more than just the students at Lowell. Some have struggled with literacy issues of their own, and they understand the connection between learning to read and success later in life.

Perhaps Janelle Day said it best. "[Our project] will make our community a better place. The younger kids will be better readers, so when they grow up, our community will be better too."

