

Let's Beautify Cumberland Day

By Tammy Twigg

My students and community have recognized the need for citizen involvement to help revitalize and rejuvenate our local neighborhoods. Let's Beautify Cumberland Day is a collaborative effort between our local County United Way, businesses, and schools that teaches our students about the importance of a clean environment and the positive impact that humans can have on the environment. My students became involved when I contacted our local Board of Education and I asked about my students becoming involved because this event tied into our Voluntary State Curriculum and the Core Learning Goals for government. This was a terrific hands-on activity that allowed me to teach my students about the Environmental Protection Agency and the Clean Air Act. This annual event allows the community and our students to come together and help clean up blighted neighborhoods.

Best Practice 1: What recognized community need was met by your project (e.g. health, education, environmental or public safety need)?

In August of 1996, a grassroots organization started Let's Beautify Cumberland Day. My students realized that our community has many neighborhoods that are dirty and poorly kept. Our school is located within the city limits and students walking and riding the bus go through these decaying neighborhoods in order to get to school. Almost 59% of residents in our community are low to moderate income according to the 2000 Census. Overcrowding is a major concern for our area. Allegany County has taken the lead in trying to restore the natural environment.

Best Practice 2: How was the project connected to school curriculum (e.g. what course outcomes were met and/or how did the project reinforce or enhance student academic learning)?

This project falls in line with the Maryland Voluntary State Curriculum and Core Learning Goals for government. Students are learning about environmental concerns and the impact that people and industry have on the environment. Students are also introduced to the Clean Air Act and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). My students also collaborated with other agencies and our local government. They witnessed the process of how a grassroots organization can mobilize an entire community. My students worked with the community and its citizens to help renew a sense of pride. Our neighborhoods and community worked together for the benefit of everyone.

Best Practice 3: How did you reflect on your experience throughout the project?

Let's Beautify Cumberland was started by a grassroots organization that was fed up with the blighted properties and junk cars that were lining our city streets. By working with the Day of Caring and Sharing through our local County United Way, several businesses, both profit and nonprofit, we worked together to help clean up our neighborhoods.

Our students live in these neighborhoods and their parents work in these neighborhoods. They realize the impact that people can have on the environment. Our community has several industrial sites that dump waste and raw sewage into the Potomac River. The small city of Cumberland has in itself removed 362 junked cars from city streets. After participating in the event for the first time and witnessing the impact first hand, students agreed that this is a project that should continue year after year. To further enhance the learning and reflect on our experiences, students will take a trip to Washington D.C. so they can tour our Federal Government's Environmental Protection Agency.

Best Practice 4: How did students take leadership roles and take responsibility for the success of the project?

Students connected with the neighborhood coordinators and the County United Way and created several designated areas that would be cleaned up. The students identified the tools and materials needed for those sites. Students were extremely excited because during the 2006 clean up, their school site was selected as an area to be worked on. The students planted flowers, spread mulch, and picked up trash near and around the school. The students choose and planned where they were going to plant flowers and arrange flower beds.

Best Practice 5: What community partners did you work with on this project (e.g. non-profits, civic organizations, business that provided donations, etc.)?

The entire community has made this event very successful for the past several years. Our students have partnered with the local County United Way, our local mayor and city council, the local board of elections, Congressman Bartlett's District Office, our local management board, Friends Aware, the Y.M.C.A, and our local volunteer center. In addition, numerous businesses donated plants, mulch, shovels, tools, and people for this annual event.

Best Practice 6: How did you prepare and plan ahead for the project?

The students learned in class about the Environmental Protection Agency and the Clean Air Act. We then identified spots that we would like to beautify in our community. We then contacted the County United Way and the local volunteer center to set up the equipment, plans, and supplies that we would need delivered to our work sites. The students devised a plan of action and each group worked on cleaning or planting flowers for that designated area. All of the students enjoyed, and were proud of, their work.

Best Practice 7: What knowledge and skills did students develop through this project?

Existing elements of the government curriculum were brought to life for students through the service-learning project. They learned about the EPA and Clean Air Act, and my students learned that the impact of people's actions can have a positive or negative effect on the environment. When the community takes pride in its neighborhoods, there is a ripple effect and other people and communities become involved in helping to clean up their cities and towns. Frostburg State University students and faculty have also joined the effort and are conducting clean ups of their community and ours. Community involvement is a life skill that can be passed from one generation to the next. By getting involved in community clean up projects, students learn about the impact every individual has on the environment.