

Kids Helping Kids with Cancer

By Melanie Ware

Our Survival Unit, a part of the 7th grade Frederick County language arts curriculum, was a perfect opportunity to create a student service-learning project addressing cancer, a concern in our community. After pooling knowledge about cancer, we invited a teacher whose daughter has leukemia to come in and talk about her daughter's experience. In classes to follow, students used the jigsaw method to become experts on topics related to cancer such as history of cancer, causes of cancer, cancer treatments, and so on. We also compared and contrasted articles discussing children their age with cancer. Students then made anti-smoking posters to hang in the hallways of our school community. Learning about Guatemala and their tradition of the worry dolls led to making hundreds of worry dolls to send to the children of Johns Hopkins Hospital Oncology Unit. Student wrote poems to attach to the dolls explaining the tradition of the worry doll, which is thought to take your worries away. In addition, students sold "Give a Smile to A Kid with Cancer" smiley faces for \$1 and raised over \$800 that we sent to Hopkins along with the worry dolls to purchase entertainment for the children staying there for treatment. This project happened to coincide with the Senate's decision on banning smoking in public places. After an in-class debate, students wrote a letter to their senator voicing their opinion on the upcoming bill.

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

Our community has a high incidence of smoking and cancer. This project addressed causes of cancer and educated students on the dangers of adopting a lifestyle involving those causes. We also met the needs of Johns Hopkins Pediatric Oncology Unit that was in need of activities for the older children who received treatment.

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)?

Various Writing and Reading for Information indicators were addressed including the following: determine the author's purpose, examine an author's argument, viewpoint, or perspective; make a connection between organizational pattern and author's purpose; compare and contrast information from different articles; draw inferences, conclusions, or generalizations about texts and support them with textual evidence and experiences; evaluate text features to gain meaning; compare and contrast information with prior knowledge; writing to express personal ideas/literary ideas; writing to Inform; and writing to persuade.

Best Practice 3: How did you reflect on your experience throughout the project? Reflection is an important component in all lessons. For this project, student reflected throughout lessons in the form of exit passes and discussions. After sending the money and worry dolls to Johns Hopkins, students filled out a reflection sheet where they were asked questions such as: "What are examples of worries we or others experience in our society? Where might we donate our worry dolls to encourage others who might need them the most? What did you learn about yourself and others as a result of completing this service-learning project?" Then again, at the end of the entire project, they were asked to share how this project had changed them and how it would affect their choices in the future.

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

Student responsibility began when the community need was discussed, and students offered ideas as to how we could address this need. They took an active role in creating this student service- learning project. Once the project had begun, student responsibility continued as our students took the lead in expert groups during our research on cancer, collected money for Johns Hopkins on their own time, helped other students during the creation of the worry dolls, completed the smiles and hung them on the cafeteria bulletin board to celebrate those who had donated, and once again as they developed opinions about the smoking ban and defended them.

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

We established community partnerships with local businesses and families as our students went door-to-door to collect money for children with cancer. We developed the closest partnership with Johns Hopkins Pediatric Oncology Unit. The Thurmont Middle School community was engaged by the anti-smoking posters created by our students and displayed in the school.

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

Students were involved in the planning of this project. I think it is important for students to take ownership from the start. After we decided what we would do, I planned the details with Candace Desonier, our Renzulli teacher, and the other seventh grade LA teachers on our staff.

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

Students were made aware that there are needs in the community that will go unmet if no one steps forward to help. They found that one needs to research and gather information before moving forward. They discovered that despite the fact that they are adolescents, they were able to make a difference in the lives of others.

