

# SERVICE LEARNING

## STUDENTS CONNECTING TO THE COMMUNITY



Cathryn Berger Kaye in a meeting with Concordia International School Curriculum Director and teachers.

Concordia International School

**P**arents of school-age children will be hearing a lot more about service learning as an important part of their child's education. Service learning is teaching children to learn more about the world around them and how they can make a difference – and it's a growing part of many schools' curricula.

Cathryn Berger Kaye, M.A., an international service learning and education consultant visited Concordia International School in November to work with teachers and administrators from Shanghai's international school community.

*Urban Family* asked Kaye to explain more about the values of service learning and its impact on our children.

**Service learning seems like a big concept. Can you explain what it is and how it's similar or different to volunteering or performing community service?**

Community service often looks like a fundraiser. In this case,

students are often what I call "taxis," moving money from home to the classroom without a rich understanding of the underlying issue. When the dominant form of "service" is contributing money or goods (usually from home), children can think that we can solve every issue with a check and keep at arm's length from real situations.

Or there may be a one-time experience doing an activity, like a walkathon or a visit to sing songs to elders, and still there is no real connection and sometimes even a building of stereotypes.

With service learning, children of all ages learn about the underlying issues. They discover a need they can respond to, using their interests, skills and talents, and energy – which is what they genuinely have to offer.

**Can you give some specific example of service learning in action?**

Younger children could write bilingual books with the help of

older students to meet a local need for teaching resources. They could make artwork for a children's hospital ward and provide coloring books with geometric shapes made in a math class. Students can even become citizen journalists in a writing class to become the eyes and ears of their community about environmental issues. When they learn that air pollution is a complex issue in science class they can determine a strategy to make a relevant impact.

**How can service learning be taught not only in schools, but also at home in our families?**

It's very helpful for parents to understand the value of service learning in the school context, so they can support the interest of their child and they also can share what they do in service. Very often children don't know how much, how often and how frequently parents may volunteer, or how a parent's workplace makes contributions to society.

It's very important for children

to have a larger context that our families are already involved in doing some good in the world. They're participating in ways that are helpful and meaningful. That's an important foundation.

It's also important that, whenever possible, families find ways to do service together. We can look for ways we can apply our child's interests in the community. One way to pique their interest is through books about important social issues.

**You've written several books with Philippe Cousteau about the environment, most recently, *Make a Splash! A Kid's Guide to Protecting Our Oceans, Lakes, Rivers & Wetlands*, which is a particularly important topic for kids growing up in China. What advice or encouragement do you have for kids who want to be environmentally active in the midst of some of the world's worst pollution?**

The idea with pollution is that even daily small actions can add up to significant changes. For example, what are ways we contribute to pollution around us every day? They can find the connection between litter and air pollution, that through litter we're creating an imbalance in our ecosystem that can create more strain on our environment that leads to pollution.

Or they can learn that every time we leave the lights on when we're not using them, we're stressing our electrical system and power grids, which contribute to higher power consumption, which contributes to pollution. The truth is we make a difference every day in the choices we make.