

Volunteers In Public Schools

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Ellenville Central School District

At a Board of Education meeting on April 24, 2002, the following resolution was adopted: "Students entering the ninth grade in 2002 and all students thereafter, while matriculating to earn a high school diploma, shall earn one additional local credit by active engagement in a minimum of 40 hours of community service within the local school district community as approved by the high school principal or designee." Three years earlier, the board had commissioned a committee to study the feasibility of establishing such a requirement. After much research and contemplation, the Class of 2006 will be the first class that must meet this requirement.

Ellenville is not alone in requiring students to volunteer. The state of Maryland requires all of its students to complete 75 hours of volunteer service; the City of Detroit requires 200 hundred hours of service; and Chicago requires 40 hours. In New York State, Commack High School requires its students to complete 65 hours.

Rather than call our volunteer requirement "community service," Ellenville has chosen to use the term "service learning." Service learning is recognized throughout the United States as a way to combine service to the community with student learning in a way that improves both the student and the community. To learn more about service learning you can log onto www.learnandserve.org.

Every student in this year's ninth grade received a copy of the Service Learning Handbook prepared by the district's *Volunteers in Public Schools (VIPS)* Office. In all of their English classes, time was spent with the students going over the handbook and the requirement.

Students were given a logical explanation as to why they had to meet this new requirement. Students almost always want to know why they have to complete a school assignment. It is more meaningful if they can see how it affects them. Some of the reasons given as to why volunteering is beneficial to them are: 1- It helps them gain entrance to college; 2- It assists them in getting scholarships and awards; 3- They gain valuable job experience; 4- It serves as a tool for career exploration; 5- There is personal growth; 6- It improves their health and self-esteem. In the handbook, there are seven

additional very good reasons for them to volunteer. The handbook also goes over their responsibilities as a volunteer, how to find a place to volunteer, tips on keeping a journal, and more.


Students are required to find their own place to volunteer, which gives them experience in finding a job. The *VIPS* office will assist students in their efforts to find a placement, if necessary. A database of local not-for-profit agencies where they can volunteer is made available to them. Once a placement has been found and approved they can begin their 40-hour assignment.

The 40 hours can be completed anytime during their four years in high school, but preferably prior to the end of the first semester of their senior year. It can be done after school, on weekends, or over the summer and at whatever pace is agreeable to the student and his/her volunteer placement supervisor. Students also have the option of completing their required hours at more than one volunteer placement.

During their service learning experience students must keep a journal. The journal allows them to process what is happening and also serves as a memento of what will hopefully be a very rewarding experience. It will also help them as they complete an essay upon completion of their 40 hours. This reflective essay is a main component of service learning. Students look back on their experience and put in words what it has meant to them or how it has changed them.

Their supervisors also evaluate the students during the experience. These evaluations let us address any issues that might arise, and they also serve as useful documents that allow the students to see their strengths and weaknesses. Students can also use positive evaluations to show future employers how well they performed at their volunteer sites.

Once the 40 hours, the journal, and the reflective essay are completed, the students will be given a P or F (pass or fail) grade, which will appear on their transcripts, and awarded one local credit towards graduation.

Service learning at *Ellenville High School* is a new and exciting program that will benefit not only our school community but, more importantly, our students. If you would like more information please contact the *VIPS* Office at 647-0107. 



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