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Education

Schools incorporates leadership lessons into class activities



Tom Lynn

Seventh-grade students lead fourth-grade students in the leadership curriculum at University Lake School by participating in the "human knot" exercise on the school's rope course. Leadership lessons at the school require students to teach other groups of students and complete service projects.

By [Amy Hetzner](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Nothing taught University Lake School senior Katie Effertz as much about leadership as the trip she took with some classmates last spring to Santiago, Chile.

There, she helped guide a group of Spanish-speaking students through some of the games and other lessons her class had prepared on leadership for other high school students in Waukesha County. And she did it all in Spanish.

"It definitely helped me grow in confidence," Effertz said. "I think I shook throughout the entire presentation."

Some believe that leadership is something you either have or you don't. But schools such as ULS believe leadership can be taught.

The private college preparatory school in Delafield started its leadership program about 10 years ago, and now it teaches leadership skills - from conflict resolution and goal-setting to decision-making and tolerance - to students from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Leadership also is part of service-learning opportunities pursued in a growing number of schools throughout the state.

Schools always have taught students some sort of leadership by offering opportunities to participate in student councils, clubs and other extracurricular activities.

But by embedding leadership lessons in classroom activities, schools can reach more than the "natural leaders," said Teri Dary, education consultant for service learning at the state Department of Public Instruction.

"It embraces all students as leaders," she said. "That's what our communities need. It's engaging the students that may be leading very effectively in a different direction."

The fifth-grade students at Hayes Bilingual School in Milwaukee are in their third year of a service-learning project focused on restoring the Kinnickinnic River.

As part of the project, students have studied river ecology and participated in efforts to clean up the river, which include a public-awareness campaign about waste disposal, said Tomas Kelnhofer, a library-media specialist and bilingual educator at Hayes.

Along the way, students learn important skills for leaders, such as communication and collaboration, in what essentially becomes a student-led activity.

But such projects can be time-consuming, especially in an urban school system that is facing pressure to improve student test performances and allocate blocks of time to subject areas such as reading and math.

"We've been able to do it, but I'm a little concerned," Kelnhofer said. "There's been a lot of weight put on assessments."

Proponents of service learning say it doesn't have to conflict with an emphasis on student test performance. Dary argues that students actually learn more through such activities, because they retain

the information better and subjects can be taught more efficiently when they're connected to real-world experiences.

Emily Hendersen, a sophomore at Union Grove High School, said she learned most of her leadership skills through service-learning activities when she was in elementary and middle school.

"It's taught me more than any learning strategy I've ever had," said Hendersen, 16. "I really believe it's the one way that you can get kids prepared for the future because kids are the next generation of leaders."

University Lake School has adopted a similar philosophy in teaching leadership through service.

"You can't just teach leadership, you do it," said Nancy Bicha-Dale, a counselor at the school who focuses on teaching leadership to students in the younger grades.

As part of this, ULS has embedded regular activities into its curriculum that require students to teach other groups of students, complete service projects and engage in outdoor educational trips. Beyond that, core leadership values such as ethics are taught in nearly every class at the school, said Ronald Smyczek, upper school head and science teacher.

Graduates also have to take a leadership class taught by the upper school's college counselor, Michael Dolan.

In addition to learning "soft skills," such as collaboration and communication, ULS students also are encouraged to learn about who they are and what they want to be through such classes, he said.

"Good leadership is a habit," Dolan said. "It's something you apply every day."

In talking about the leadership skills that they've learned, ULS students mention a lot of what other schools might call citizenship or character education. These include learning to get along with each other, working with each other and listening and respecting others.

But they also add concepts such as compromise and reserving judgment of others.

"We learned communication skills such as eye contact and standing up and squaring your shoulders," said Lee Smith, 12, a seventh-grader at the school.

While remembering to make eye contact is easy, "some of it is a little bit harder," Lee said.

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