

A Perpetual Return on Investment

By Nancy Griffin-Bonnaire



Many of us were relieved to bid farewell to 2008, a year that will be remembered for unprecedented economic woes that rippled from Wall Street to Main Street and around the globe.

The world's financial problems will not be resolved overnight, and in this fragile economy, school district budget cuts are likely the norm. Is there anything school business officials can do to start moving in a positive direction?

As a matter of fact, there is.

Give more. Yes, *give*—but not your money. Volunteering your time and expertise is far more valuable to your community during times like these, and if the saying “What goes around, comes around” holds true, stepping

up to fulfill your social responsibilities can be both personally and professionally rewarding. Think of it as a perpetual return on investment.

Everything Old Is New Again

When President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was sworn into office in 1933, one of his top priorities was to launch programs that would offer immediate relief for rampant unemployment in the United States. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a work relief program for young men from unemployed families, was established on March 21, 1933, and became one of the most popular New Deal programs. Although the CCC closed in 1942, it was the model for volunteer agencies that were initiated for decades to come.

Chicago Cares is one such organization. Founded in 1991 by two women seeking to create a way for people to give back to their communities, Chicago Cares' main focus is to build stronger communities within the city. Since the group's inception, volunteers have carried out nearly one million hours of community service. Committing only to the amount of time they wish to dedicate, volunteers are recruited primarily through word-of-mouth and run the gamut from school-age children to retirees.

Kristine Williams, manager of marketing and community involvement at Chicago Cares, explains that the organization works with community leaders to identify areas with critical needs. "There are six areas of concern that we focus on: children's education, adult education, senior services, the environment, hunger, and health and wellness," says Williams, who notes that Chicago Cares has partnered with more than 200 different Chicago-based organizations, from schools and parks to housing authorities and social service agencies. One of more than 200 service projects on the roster last November involved physical improvements to Canter Middle School.

Participating in a Transformation

With a student population of about 250, Canter Middle School is one of just 18 Chicago Public Schools serving only 7th and 8th graders, the majority of whom are



African-American and 65% of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Canter's main building was constructed in 1902, followed by an annex in 1936.

After serving as assistant principal for five years at a neighboring high school, Colleen Conlan became Canter's principal at the beginning of the 2007–2008 school year and quickly witnessed the effects of smaller budgets on schools with fewer students. "Paint on the walls was peeling, and things were in bad shape," she says.

The school's physical condition made it difficult for Conlan to launch her ambitious goals at Canter, such as

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We need to keep driving school performance despite shrinking budgets.

- A Yes.
- B So achievement drops off a bit. That's just called a rebuilding year, right?

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instilling in students an unwavering belief in the school's academic slogan, "Think Big, Think College." To help promote this mindset, Conlan says, students must have strong feelings of self-worth, and one way of increasing those feelings is to get students to take pride in their school and themselves. But because Canter must share an engineer with four other area schools, maintaining the building was difficult and beautification efforts remained out of reach—until Conlan connected with Chicago Cares.

With so much attention being paid to getting youth to buy into the idea of service, don't we have the responsibility to set the example?

Conlan called the organization shortly after she arrived at Canter, and an initial improvement project was held in October 2007. To prepare for their Hands-On School Initiative last fall, planning began early in the school year. It started with a community design event, which brought together more than 60 people (current students, teachers, parents, community leaders, and Chicago Cares representatives) to brainstorm ideas about what the school needed. That was followed by a subsequent meeting between Chicago Cares and a committee of approximately 20 Canter students and several teachers who wanted to lead the effort.

The project began on October 1 and entailed painting the school's first floor and four classrooms, as well as installing tile mosaics in each classroom and hanging canvas murals throughout the building. On November 22, the project was bolstered by the efforts of 173 volunteers, including local school business officials and Maureen Thompson, ASBO International's events director.

The volunteers installed a mosaic "tree of knowledge" on the wall just inside Canter's main entrance, where it will greet all school visitors and brighten the hallway. They also created six murals, mounted mosaics on two teacher podiums, painted two stairwells and eight classrooms, and transformed the library by making over the entire space—adding new furniture and lighting, as well as creating a brand new reading space for students.

Marilyn Roland, payroll and human resources supervisor for Lake Bluff District 65, was one of the local school business officials who volunteered for the project. "When you are asked to participate in a project like this,

you're never sure what you will be asked to do and if you have qualifications that will make an impact," says Roland, adding, "Chicago Cares was great at assuring everyone that their time and talents would be used, useful, and greatly appreciated."

Roland was among the volunteers slated to work in the library. Although the group thought this would be one of the more mundane tasks, they turned it into an event in which others wanted to participate. "Part of the [library] task included throwing old, unusable textbooks out a window into a recycling bin three floors below. What fun!" says Roland. Working with her was Mary Ann Brown, financial analyst for Rockford SD 205, who adds, "It was such a great stress relief. We ended up having a small competition to see how many books we could drop at once compared to how many ended up in the bin. It was also a great way to show physics at work to our student helpers."

Grateful for the physical changes to the building, Conlan and her staff are even more excited about the transformation in Canter student attitudes, which they witness just as clearly as any aesthetic improvement made to the school.

Integrating Service Into Learning

Eleven months before he was elected into office, Barack Obama issued a "Call to Serve," detailing his commitment to making national service an important cause of his presidency. He discussed his personal experience in public service and his plan to call on all Americans to serve and create an infrastructure focusing their service on achieving national goals. Included in Obama's suggestions were the following:

- Create a national online network (similar to Craigslist) to connect volunteers with service and donation opportunities.
- Set a goal of middle and high school students contributing at least 50 hours a year to community service.
- Connect disadvantaged youth to service opportunities through the creation of Green Job Corps and the expansion of YouthBuild.
- Create a new American Opportunity Tax Credit worth \$4,000 toward college tuition each year in exchange for 100 hours of annual public service.

With so much attention being paid to getting youth to buy into the idea of service, don't we have the responsibility to set the example? Participating in a single community service project can change a mindset forever.

"The Chicago Cares event at Canter Middle School opened my eyes to the need that exists in the wider community," says Doug Heurich, facilities director at Northbrook SD 27. "Given the very positive experience that I had, the excellent organization of the event, and the wonderful outcome of the work completed, I would not hesitate to participate in an event of this type again!"



Get on Board in October

As part of ASBO International's initiative to leave a positive "footprint," on Friday, October 23, you can be part of a driving force that will positively impact students at a public school in Chicago, site of the 2009 ASBO International Annual Meeting.

This full-day pre-conference workshop will be a win-win situation for all involved. By dedicating your time to

beautify a school in need, you'll help students take pride in themselves and their school and accomplish tasks that likely would never be attempted otherwise. No matter what your area of expertise, there will be something for you to do that will make a lasting difference—for the school, you, and ultimately even your own district.

ASBO International members who participate will know the satisfaction of playing an active role in a meaningful service learning project, earn .7 CEUs and 8 CPEs, and take home resources that will allow them to replicate the endeavor in their own communities.

Roland sums up perfectly this wonderful opportunity to set in motion a perpetual return on investment: "Just looking around Canter and seeing all that was accomplished in this very old building with very few resources—you can't help but want to do more. My hope is that we are 'paying it forward'—that the students not only at Canter but in our home districts will hear about and see individuals doing something tangible for others in need instead of just throwing money at a problem. I believe this is the best example we can show our children."

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