Share THE LOVE

Why not celebrate Valentine's Day by encouraging kids to give back to the community? **By Nancy Mann Jackson**

During February, love is in the air. Students are swapping valentines and penning versions of *Roses are red....* It's a natural time to teach students that love involves more than hearts and candy—it also means giving of oneself.

"Our responsibility as educators is to help students recognize that they are citizens of the world," says Terri Kennamer, a third-grade teacher at West Elementary School in Vestavia Hills, Alabama. "Children have such compassion for others, teachers need only to encourage their compassion and guide their response."

Here are the stories of four teachers who helped their students learn the true meaning of love by leading classroom or schoolwide outreach projects, plus takeaways for brainstorming and launching your *own* effort.

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Running for Relief

At Public School 269, also known as The Nostrand School, in Brooklyn, New York, nearly half the students are of Haitian descent. When a category 7 earthquake devastated Haiti last January, the relief effort became the year-long focus for the school, which requires students to participate in at least one service learning project each year. The Haitian relief effort was the perfect project for P.S. 269, as many students and staff lost parents, siblings, and grandparents in the quake, says Principal Phyllis Corbin.

While the initiative included several efforts, one of the most unique fundraisers was a one-mile run organized in collaboration with Mighty Milers, a New York Road Runners program that helps promote fitness in schools across the country through "fitness fundraisers," a healthy alternative to candy and bake sales. More than 400 participants collected pledges based on their mileage goals, and together they collected $3,300 in donations after they each ran a mile around a nearby track.

In addition to the run, the school's Service Learning Club collected clothes and non-perishable foods. The student council teamed up with the Catholic Medical Mission Board to assemble 200 hygiene kits for distribution to Haiti. And the district's Beacon Program sponsored a "Million Pennies for Haiti" penny drive.

Together, the staff, students, families and friends raised an additional $2,000 for relief efforts. To keep students engaged, school leaders created a "Wall of Comfort" in the lobby, where students and teachers could write well wishes for loved ones, friends, and relatives. In addition, students made posters encouraging everyone to get involved. "I would like to think that we demonstrated the power of giving," Corbin says. "The students were tremendously happy knowing that they were a part of something so important to others."

TAKEAWAY: MAKE IT PERSONAL
Students will get more out of the project if they are personally involved in giving back. Ask them what causes they care about, or what news stories have caught their attention. Use their interests as the seeds for your work in the community.
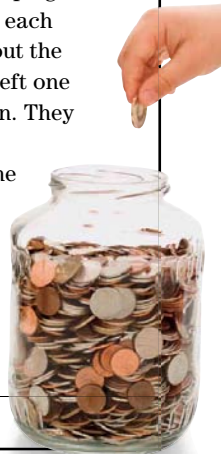
Raising Funds for Kids in Need

When Terri Kennamer's third-grade class read *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson, they learned of the author's work to support girls' education in remote regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan. From the students' interest in Mortenson's cause, "a service project was born," Kennamer says. "During our discussion, students revealed their concern that other children did not have the same resources that they had. They decided that Pennies for Peace [a nonprofit organization affiliated with Mortenson's Central Asia Institute, which helps fund education] would be their service project for the year."

With "just a little guidance" from their teacher, the third graders planned a schoolwide fundraiser, Kennamer says. "Their plan included making posters to hang around the school in order to generate interest from other classes," she says. "The class worked together to create a PowerPoint presentation advertising the campaign. The students divided into groups and went to each classroom, using their PowerPoint to talk about the project. They decorated coin containers and left one in each classroom following their presentation. They also had a large jar set up in the office."

Each day, students emptied the jars from the office and other classrooms into the large classroom jar, so they got to see the coins pile up. At the end of two weeks, the class held a "coin-counting party." The students worked in groups to roll the coins, and they ended up with $500 to donate.

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Giving the Gift of Literacy

Joan Lutz, a middle school teacher at Horizon Charter School in Sacramento, California, says she has always tried to foster a love of reading and giving back. So when she heard about the African Library Project, she knew she wanted to get involved. "When I presented the idea to students, the response was overwhelming," Lutz says.

The African Library Project helps establish libraries in Africa, which has the highest percentage of illiteracy in the world. Lutz began by showing a video from the organization, and then asked students to research Swaziland. Each student created a PowerPoint presentation about the book drive and the needs in Swaziland.

Together, the class set a goal to collect 250 books, but they exceeded that goal on the first day. By bringing in books from home and asking friends and family, Lutz's class collected 2,000 books to send to Africa.

After the books were shipped, the African Library Project sent the class photos of the students reading

their new books. "It really brought home what a great thing we did," Lutz says. "The project helped make my students more aware of how they can make a difference in the lives of others."

Replenishing the Wetlands

Part of the seventh-grade curriculum at J. B. Martin Middle School in Paradis, Louisiana, includes learning about the disappearance of local wetlands. "Every year, the students study how the wetlands impact our lifestyle and culture," says Katie Bordelon, a seventh-grade teacher at J. B. Martin. "I hear the same comments every year: 'All we need is more trees,' 'Trees can solve the problem,' 'Why can't we just plant more trees?' That is when we decided that we needed to give them that opportunity to help. They needed to realize that even at their age, they can make a difference in their community."

With fellow teacher Ashley Mills, Bordelon applied for and received a service-learning grant from Youth Service America to plant and monitor more than 800 trees to eventually be transferred to area wetlands. Three hundred seventh-grade students worked together to build a can yard to house the growing, fragile seedlings. They had to dig a 10-by-10-foot trench to bury pipes for the automatic sprinkler system, and dump several bags of gravel into the yard to create a filtering system.

"They took great pride in planting Nuttal oak seeds and bald cypress seeds, two trees that are very important to our wetland ecosystem," Bordelon says. For months, the students fertilized, weeded, and thinned the seedlings. This past November, the students transplanted about 800 trees into the LDWF Pointe-aux-Chenes Wildlife Management Area in Terrebonne Parish.

TAKEAWAY: MAKE IT A LEARNING OPPORTUNITY. The J. B. Martin project began with a class discussion. What are you talking about that could lead to a project? Joan Lutz, teacher at Horizon Charter School, recommends asking students to research the area your project will be serving, or bring in a guest speaker to discuss how your efforts will make a difference.

To keep students motivated, their teachers "worked to connect coastal land loss to the students' real lives," Bordelon says. "On a field trip to a local park, they got to see up close how our coast is wearing away. This really hit home, since the park is only a few miles away from their own backyards. Their families' livelihood, their favorite foods, and their weekend activities will also be impacted by the disappearing wetlands. In learning that we have lost miles of coastland in our own community, they were extremely motivated to make a difference." □