

The Learning Curve

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Your weekly guide to students, schools, teachers and triumphs in Bibb County's Public Schools

Community Service requirements teach students responsibility and importance of volunteering



Hutchings Career Center volunteers tour Macon's Rescue Mission.

"We expect all of our students to participate in community service," says Hutchings Career Center Counselor and Community Service Coordinator Elaine Lucas. "It builds an appreciation in them for what they have, and it helps them to start building the community."

Many schools, like Hutchings, have some kind of required community service for their students. Whether it's school-wide, part of an advanced program, a club/organization activity, or part of a class they are taking, there are many chances for a student to become actively involved in their community.

"They see there is a need for their help," says Lucas.

Hutchings students, as one of their requirements for graduation, must volunteer a total of 24 hours over the course of their four years. According to Lucas, many of them complete that in just one year, and others go above and beyond the minimum requirement. In just

three years, the students have logged more than 1,000 hours of volunteer time in the community.

Central High School also incorporates community service into their graduation requirements. International Baccalaureate (IB) students must complete 150 hours of service in their junior and senior years, and students enrolled in the Fine Arts Magnet program must log 10 hours of service each semester. According to Dot Brown, Fine Arts Coordinator, by the end of their senior year, they will have accumulated 80 hours or more of service. In addition to volunteering, a Fine Arts student must also go into the community and attend four cultural events (approved by the faculty), including plays, concerts, art galleries, museums, poetry readings, and public performances.

Even groups and organizations within the schools are requiring some form of community service. Rutland High School's National Beta Club and Central's National Honor Society both reach out to the community. Central's NHS' main project is with the Ronald McDonald House, cooking for them on the first Thursday of every month. Miller Middle has a group called Helping Other People Everyday (H.O.P.E.) which spends its Saturdays volunteering at children's and nursing homes around the county. According to Principal Tanzy Kilcrease, the students have enjoyed the experience so much, they are allowing the students to keep participating even when they go to Central.

Students are also exposed to the importance of volunteering and community service through their classrooms. Rhea Patrick, Central's MoID (moderate intellectual disabilities) class teacher, takes two classes once a month to either Mulberry Outreach or First Presbyterian Church to give their time and efforts. "It gives our students a chance to learn how to use public transportation,

how to think of other people, to learn about community resources, and promote self-esteem for a job well done," she says.

The students help with any job assigned to them, including serving food, cleaning dishes, and sterilizing nursery toys. "This gives us opportunities to practice real-life skills in real-life settings," Patrick says. "As new settings are explored, their understanding of what is required in the working world is increased."

Southwest Law Academy Director John Matthews teaches a course offered to seniors "to give them opportunities to help in the community and understand the significance of the volunteering spirit they should have as an adult." They work for non-profit agencies and are required to log five hours every week for the entire semester they are in the class. Each week, they submit a report which describes the type of duties they had to work on. At the end of the semester, they make "a presentation to the class on the agency and what they gained from working there."

"Each project [a student works on] is a learning experience," explains Lucas. The more popular volunteer assignments are nursing homes and working with the church, but "we urge them to be creative." Some recent ideas have been getting a traffic light installed at a busy intersection and collecting socks for nursing home residents.

Volunteering does not just benefit the community, says Lucas. Not only are the students learning real-life skills in the job market, they are able to see how different jobs work, helping them make life-long career decisions. Students now are even asking for copies of their volunteer documentation to include with college and scholarship applications. "It's practical as well as helping the community."

Weaver Middle smooths transition between schools Helps prepare students and parents to enter the middle school environment

From beginning to end, middle school is a time of transition. 6th graders are adjusting to a new school environment, and 8th graders are preparing to enter high school. "It's a little overwhelming, a little frightening," says Social Studies Department Chair Dorothy Taylor.

"This is a stepping stone for what they do in high school," agrees Weaver Middle Principal Dr. Pam Carswell.

This last year was Weaver's first year teaching 6th graders, so they have had to come up with ways to make the transition easier for students and parents. To help this incoming class, faculty held separate open houses at each elementary feeder school at the end of the 2003-2004 school year, meeting their future students there. This year, however, they realized they needed to be bringing these students and parents into Weaver. "Some parents had never been in the building before," says Taylor.

"We felt like we needed to get them into our school, and this is a great anxiety reducer," agrees language arts and social studies teacher Wendy Pooler.

Open House was held near the end of the school year, and to help make the students more comfortable, they were told of all the activities they had the chance to participate in. Dr. Carswell made a presentation about the academics, sports, clubs, and organizations they could join, and the band, chorus, and drama departments each performed for the parents and students. "We try to impress them with what's available and catch their interest," Carswell says.

"It's equally important to make the parents comfortable," adds Taylor, so they had the school's entire staff of teachers (not just 6th grade teachers) present. This way, the parents could meet every teacher their child

could have during the next three years. "We feel it's important to make this a comfortable and smooth transition from the elementary school environment to the middle school environment."

After the presentations, teachers went to their respective classrooms, and parents and students were given the opportunity to tour the school and ask specific questions. "We don't want anyone coming in and feeling they don't know what's going on," says Taylor.

A major change between the two school environments is the level of parental involvement and student responsibility. Students have to learn new study skills, be responsible for doing homework without their parents signing off on it, and making sure they keep their parents updated on grades and school events. This past year, teachers were finding they were spending part of their day instructing students on how things worked in middle school. The students did not quite seem ready to take over their new responsibilities.

"We're constantly analyzing and evaluating what did and didn't work," explains Taylor. "We're always trying to improve and fine tune so it works better."

To help prepare students for the added responsibility, the school will be hosting a day-long workshop on July 27. It is free of charge, and a parent must attend with the student. They are shown how to use a school planner, how the class changes work, how to use notebooks and dividers, test-taking skills, homework tips, and study skills.

Though the focus of the workshop is on helping the students get ready, "some parents still want to know [everything that is going on]," says Pooler. They are introduced to Parent Connect, a system set up by the school so the parents can check on their child's attendance,

grades, and assignments. They can even receive e-mails should a grade fall below a number they set. "We think this can make us better."

According to Carswell, sometimes the transition can be harder on the parents than the students, so they try to bring them in as much as possible. "It didn't take [the 6th graders] long to adjust," she says.

"They were so quiet, no waves, for a couple of months," agrees Pooler. "Then they just came alive."

"They find out: 'hey, I can do this,'" says Carswell.



Weaver Middle faculty got together with rising 6th graders and their parents to help introduce them to the school and what it has to offer.