



**Educators Consortium  
for Service Learning**

## **An Organization's Perspective on Working with Student Service Learning Volunteers**

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**ABOUT US** Mothers' Club Family Learning Center in Pasadena prepares families isolated by *poverty, lack of education and inadequate social support* to succeed in school and in life by increasing the skills and education of both mother and child. Our mission is centered on two-generation learning (mothers and their children ages 0-5), literacy, parenting, and empowerment.

Our clients are typically first- and second-generation immigrants from Mexico and Central America. We offer English as Second Language (ESL) and parenting classes to our moms; our client children attend our award-winning preschool, which has five classrooms ranging from Infants to Pre-Kindergarten. School readiness and lots of developmental play are the focus of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) program.

We offer volunteer opportunities for students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade or older. Most of our Service Learning classes work in our ECE classrooms with our teachers and children.

**PRESENTATION** How our approach to volunteerism and service learning at Pasadena's Mothers' Club Family Learning Center evolved from one based on "quantity" (how many hours can I get?) to "quality" (how are students' visits serving a critical need in our community and advancing our mission?)

**My struggle:** In my first year at Mothers' Club Volunteer Program Coordinator (2011-2012), it felt like we were a revolving door for Community Service projects and Service Learning courses. Students needed hours, teachers wanted their classes to visit, but I found our volunteers/teachers very under prepared and uninformed about why Mothers' Club existed – why our mission was critically important in the impoverished NW Pasadena neighborhoods. It seemed that teachers assumed that just by making a quick volunteer visit, students would "get it" – would understand our mission just by osmosis. We were simply a receptacle for community service and I didn't feel like we were getting a lot of "quality" back from all the efforts we were putting forth.

Pasadena is one of the most unequal cities in the state of California in income inequality; we are ranked 4<sup>th</sup> after Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland, all cities far larger than Pasadena. It became very important to me to share with students what poverty looks like in a community as affluent as ours. I wanted to spotlight what being socially isolated, vulnerable and at-risk means in our

community. I wanted them to understand what, for kids, it means to be poor -- with stressed out parents who don't speak English and have multiple worries on their shoulders and how that situation impacts their futures and their education. I wanted to break stereotypes about immigrants. I wanted to pull back the curtain on poverty and show them the struggles *and* the humanity and hope of our client families. Most of our service learning students come from privileged backgrounds and wealthy independent schools. To them, poverty is mostly invisible. Mothers' Club is a place where poverty is a reality. But in our center, we also see growth, resilience, aspiration, laughter, nurturing, and confidence. I want service learning students to hear about and experience both sides of our coin.

I also understood and witnessed that we were trying to accommodate more volunteers than was beneficial to our program. That just because a teacher or a class "needed" service learning didn't mean we were necessarily the right fit for them. I was tired of trying to create opportunities that didn't really help us in the long run.

So I implemented a much more qualitative and selective approach to our service learning commitments. I ask teachers to visit and talk with me beforehand, and then I send them several articles about early intervention in the lives of impoverished children, how two-generation learning programs are so beneficial, and how empowering mothers impacts their families exponentially. I expect that the teachers will share some of this info with their students at an age-appropriate level, and encourage discussion.

## **STAGES of SERVICE LEARNING at MOTHERS' CLUB My role as Volunteer Manager at Mothers' Club helps serve three of the five Stages of Service Learning: Investigation, Preparation, and Action.**

**Investigation:** Social analysis of our mission has proven to be a critical component of service learning experiences. It is something I implemented after seeing students arriving for tours and hands-on volunteering without really understanding two critical things: 1) WHY Mothers' Club exists and how it directly serves a critical social need in our NW Pasadena community and 2) HOW volunteers serve our mission; i.e., why their visits are important to our mission.

### WAYS ACCOMPLISHED:

- Conversations and a tour of our facility in advance with Service Learning Coordinator/Teacher, preferably before the school year begins.
- Sending the teacher a few key readings about poverty/immigration/literacy/two-generation learning that s/he can share with the class.
- Asking the teacher to share our website and any internal reading materials I send them with students and having a discussion about them before a volunteer visit.

**Preparation:** We ensure that every school group arriving at Mothers' Club is well prepared for their role as volunteers and that they have a firm (and age-appropriate) understanding of our mission and the kinds of social issues we encounter and address.

### WAYS ACCOMPLISHED:

- Before volunteer service begins, our "Working with Children" document and Volunteer Application are sent home with students to read/get signed by parent
- We then host a qualitative info session with students on their first day of service. Before they ever get to step foot in the classrooms, they must take part in a 45-minute Orientation with me in our library. We talk at length about Mothers' Club's mission, who we serve and why, our center's daily schedule, and, by reviewing our Working with Children document that they signed, our expectations for them as volunteers.

- We ensure that they understand WHY they are here, how their visit serves our teachers and families, and what they will gain out of it.

**Action:** Service learning courses (typically 8<sup>th</sup> graders) from several of our partner schools visit ranging from once a week for an hour; once a month for 45 minutes; or 3-4 times a semester for the entire morning (3 hours at a time).

**WAYS ACCOMPLISHED:**

- Teen volunteers are only placed in our Early Childhood Education classrooms, working directly with our teachers and young children in the Infant, Toddler, Twos, Preschool and PreK rooms. They are prepared to be role models and assist in all classroom activities. They play with the children; talk with them to help in language development; show them new and unique ways to play; and serve as an extra set of eyes during daily routines. Most of all, we tell them that by coming to our center as responsible, intelligent, engaged, playful and helpful teens, they serve as powerful role models for our children AND for our moms, who can aspire for their own children to one day be similarly capable and educated teens.

**ISSUES that impact the success of Service Learning at Mothers' Club:**

- Teachers often don't have enough time to delve into the topic before visits begin, so students still arrive under prepared
- Length of visits often are too short and not entirely helpful to our Mothers' Club teachers (more trouble than it's worth sometimes).
- How to expand the reach of our volunteer program to public schools and minority students
- Unfortunately, I typically am not involved in any follow up or reflection. It would be important for me to hear what students experienced and how they started to draw links between the materials and discussions they had in class prior to their visits and their actual experiences while volunteering.

**SAMPLE SOURCES used to prepare teachers and students**

"Literacy Gap Between Latino and White Toddlers Starts Early, Study Shows" *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 2015: <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-latino-literacy-20150401-story.html>

"The Numbers Add Up to This: Less and Less Opportunities for Poor Kids." NPR Report, March 10, 2015: <http://www.npr.org/2015/03/10/391922654/the-numbers-add-up-to-this-less-and-less-opportunity-for-poor-kids>

"The Way to Beat Poverty." New York Times, September 12, 2014: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-the-way-to-beat-poverty.html?smid=nytcore-ipad-share&smprod=nytcore-ipad&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-the-way-to-beat-poverty.html?smid=nytcore-ipad-share&smprod=nytcore-ipad&_r=1)

