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Disaster in Haiti inspires myriad projects in Washington area schools

By Michael Alison Chandler
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When the earthquake struck Haiti, students at Waples Mill Elementary School in Oakton moved into action. The student council decided to launch a pennies-for-Haiti program with plans to collect coins for the American Red Cross, and one student proposed setting up a school chapter of the international relief organization.

Community service projects are nothing new for the school. They are a central part of its mission. Last school year, the Fairfax County school launched a [Children's Philanthropy Center](#) with a service-learning program that is woven into the curriculum.

"When you think of community service at schools, you think of collecting mittens or canned food," Principal Linda Thetford said. Waples Mill staff members wanted to go further, to teach students to pursue service projects that involve recognizing and researching a social problem, developing a solution and assessing its impact.

The program emphasizes ways to bring skills learned in subjects such as science, art and technology into community service. As an art project, for example, one student designed and sketched a schoolyard garden that could be accessible to students who use wheelchairs and is now working to get it constructed.

Waples Mill's schoolwide focus on community service is unusual, but children's philanthropy in general is on the rise, analysts say, especially at schools.

The disaster in Haiti has galvanized classrooms throughout the region. In Arlington County, Gunston Middle School launched a campaign to raise \$3,000 through a school dance and other fundraisers to purchase three "shelter boxes," complete with tents, water purification tablets and other survival supplies.

In Prince William County, students at Stonewall Middle School raised \$1,000 in four days through lunchtime donations to send to a local group of "medical missionaries" stationed in Haiti. And at Watkins Elementary in the District, students are raising money for Haiti by paying \$1 each to participate in a No Homework Day or a Pajamas Day.

In Fairfax County, starting next year, sixth-graders will be required to complete a community service project, Thetford said. The requirement is inspired by a School Board goal that students will "be respectful and contributing participants in their school,

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community, country and world."

Waples Mill is trying to get such projects started even earlier.

At a schoolwide youth symposium at Waples Mill late last month, students chanted "I matter!" and "Today, my voice will be heard!" They took part in workshops on leadership and service learning. Some decorated posters to display their service project proposals: One suggested getting involved in an ongoing effort to place wreaths on veterans graves; another proposed an initiative to send used belongings to poor communities in Central America. At the end of the year, the students will present the results of their projects.

The symposium's keynote speaker was Zach Bonner, founder of the Florida-based [Little Red Wagon Foundation](#), dedicated to helping underprivileged children. The sixth-grader with spiky red hair told the students sipping from juice boxes and eating cookies that he got started in community service when he was 6.

Zach made fliers that said he wanted to collect water for victims of Hurricane Charley, which struck Florida in 2004. The next day, he took his red wagon down the street to collect donations. He found almost everyone had left something for him, he said. He ultimately collected more than two dozen truckloads worth of water and supplies.

Since then, Zach has assembled and donated thousands of backpacks stocked with school supplies to students of poor families and organized a 650-mile walk from Atlanta to raise funds and awareness about homeless youths.

He said addressing the tough issue of youth homelessness was like setting out to clean his room. "It seems too huge to even start . . . but if we all work together from different corners of the world," we can make a difference, he said.

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