

Connecting Schools, Students, and the Local Community: An IGNITE Story

By Valerie Lamberton

Librarians often find themselves at the crossroads of education and community impact, and I wanted to prove just how transformative that intersection can be. By collaborating with our county's Career Development Counselor, the supervisor of Career and Technical Education, and an English 12 teacher here at Massaponax High School, in Spotsylvania County, I spearheaded a service-learning initiative that fulfilled Virginia Department of Education work-based learning requirements and connected high school students to their local community in meaningful ways.

The project, which was planned in the spring of 2023 and piloted during the 2023-2024 school year, integrated a research and service component into the English 12 curriculum that focused on the theme of "heroes," from the epic characters of *Beowulf* to modern-day trailblazers. Designed to satisfy VDOE's emphasis on equitable work-based learning, the program aims to be scalable across the district in future years.

From Research to Real-World Impact

The project began in September, with high school seniors in Amy Stevens' English 12 class selecting a modern hero to research. I went into the classroom to introduce students to research skills such as database usage, paraphrasing, and source citation. With a curated list of more than 40 historical and modern figures, students explored pioneers in fields like science, civil rights, and the arts.

The research culminated in a service-learning project where high school students created lessons to teach K-5 citizenship standards to elementary school students. Partnering with Lee Hill and Riverview Elementary Schools, the seniors focused on positive and negative character traits using the picture book *Just Help! How to Build a Better World*, by Sonia Sotomayor, as a foundation for their lessons.

The seniors crafted engaging activities, such as sorting character traits into "positive" and "negative" categories and leading group discussions on scenarios like handling conflicts or practicing honesty. These activities hit key citizenship standards while fostering connections between the older and younger students.

Field Trips Foster Engagement

In mid-December, the high school students visited the elementary schools to deliver their lessons. High school students gained public speaking and classroom management experience, while elementary students learned from relatable role models. The event was a highlight for both age groups. Senior attendance, often a challenge during the weeks leading up to winter break, saw a notable improvement due to the project. The students realized their presence was important and that they were making an impact.

Expanding the Vision

Following the pilot's success, we were able to expand the initiative to all English 12 classes at Massaponax High School this school year and to our three remaining elementary feeder schools – Cedar Forest, Spotswood, and Parkside. We made adjustments based on feedback, such as allowing more preparation time for lessons and aligning field trip dates with teachers' preferences.

To further the spirit of service, the program also introduced high school students to volunteer opportunities with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Fredericksburg. A guest speaker from the organization visited in January to encourage ongoing community engagement.

Outcomes and Reflections

A survey given at the end of the project underscored how successful we were:

- 88% of students discovered new career interests
- 98% learned the importance of service and community involvement
- 84% felt a meaningful connection to their role as mentors

Students also reported improvements in public speaking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. Elementary teachers praised the program, with 100% indicating they would participate again.

This project reinforced the library's role as a hub of innovation and collaboration. It's a reminder that our work as librarians extends far beyond the walls of the library. As the program grows, I hope to continue to demonstrate how creative partnerships can turn traditional curriculum requirements into opportunities for lasting community impact.

When we began planning the project, the IGNITE Award immediately came to mind because our project perfectly embodied its purpose. Through this initiative, students engaged in civic activities while exploring potential career paths. Additionally, the project fulfilled multiple English SOL standards and National School Library standards. Applying for this award—and being selected as the recipient—provided an excellent opportunity to advocate for the transformative impact of school libraries.

Many of you are already doing remarkable work in collaboration with teachers and the community. I encourage everyone to review the IGNITE criteria and consider how it aligns with your existing initiatives. The application process is the easy part!

Valerie Lamberton, the 2025 IGNITE Award winner, is a librarian at Massaponax High School, in Spotsylvania County.