



## Chavez American Government Service-Learning Project

Steve Yoshida, an American Government teacher at Juarez High School in Southern California, was trained in service-learning theory and practice by Youth Service California in a three-day summer institute in June 2006. During the institute, he began planning a service-learning project for his Spring 2007 American Government class. This last period of the day class, largely composed of at-risk students, had been incredibly frustrating for him during the last two years. Nothing seemed to work. The students didn't care; didn't do their work; and frequently skipped class all together.

Service-learning seemed to offer new hope. He thought it might facilitate the development of important resiliency skills, increase connection to the surrounding community and even spark engagement in learning. His hopes for service-learning in American Government were reinforced when his Department chair assigned a student teacher to him from the State University Teacher Education program for the second semester. Having an extra adult to help with planning and supervision was like a gift from heaven.

Steve began the service-learning project the first Friday of the second semester by telling the students that they were going to begin an exciting community adventure at the nearby Chavez playground. He explained that he and Sarah, the new student teacher, had visited the playground during the Christmas holidays. They observed that the playground was not being used by either adults or youth. The areas set aside for basketball and volleyball were covered with a messy layer of old papers, flattened tin cans, caked mud, and strips of bike tires. The basketball hoops had no nets, the backboards were covered with graffiti, and the metal poles were twisted and bent over.

Sarah then explained that they were going to spend one afternoon a week during the rest of the school year improving the Chavez playground. Each Friday they would leave school one hour early and walk down to the playground together and work on different projects that she and Mr. Yoshida had arranged with the Director of the Recreation Department. She went on to say that all the details were not worked out yet but everyone was definitely going to get a chance to improve this part of the community by picking up litter, removing graffiti, building and placing strong poles for basketball and volleyball, and raising money or obtaining policy support for purchasing and maintaining quality basketballs, volleyballs,

and nets. She also emphasized that they would be practicing important skills and gaining useful knowledge about how local government works.

At first most of the students seemed at least moderately enthusiastic about the service-learning project. They loved leaving the school early on Friday and enjoyed the 12- or 13- minute walk to a different place. It was even kind of fun to put on dirty clothes and muck around cleaning up the junk that littered the grounds. Their work during the first three weeks definitely made the adopted playground area look much better. Steve led a reflection discussion at the end of the third Friday " class " at the park. He began by asking, "Don't you feel a lot of pride in what you have done here? Is there anyone who doesn't feel that this place looks a lot better than when we first walked down here?"

Most of the students seemed to nod in agreement but one girl commented, "You know this place was a mess before we started and I bet it will become a mess again real soon. And you know, I really could care less."

Steve ignored her remark, and went on to enthusiastically explain that the next stage of their project was going to focus on building strong wooden posts to cement permanently in the ground for both basketball and volleyball and making personal contact with the City Manager, Recreation Department staff and City Council members. He and Sarah then took turns explaining that their service-learning project needed to have five important tasks completed and everyone would be assigned to one of five work groups.

#### **Chavez Service-learning Project Tasks for March 2006:**

1. Going to Home Depot to select the wood and prepare the wood for putting in the ground.
2. Going to Home Depot to meet with an employee who will explain how to prepare and use cement for holding the wood. This group will later be responsible for doing the cement work.
3. Staying at the site and working with a Recreation Department staff member to dig the deep holes that will be needed for the placement of the poles and cleaning up the surface areas.
4. Bringing notebooks to the Recreation Department meeting room to prepare to interview the Director of the Parks and Recreation Department and the City Manager. Their task is to find out why the Chavez playground had not received maintenance funding for two years at a time when the city had started to build a second municipal golf course on the other side of town.
5. Bringing notebooks and easel paper to the Recreation Department meeting room to work on preparing a presentation to the city council in April. The presentation will request that the 2006

budget be revised to allocate money to purchase volleyball and basketball nets and quality backboards for the Chavez playground and that the city manager be directed to provide three hours of weekly playground maintenance.

Steve then asked the youth to count off by fours for assignment into the different groups. Several youth started complaining about their assignments, leading Sarah to say, "each group will be both important and fun. Try to go along with your assignment. If anyone desperately wants to change their group, you can by arranging a trade but you need to let me know by next Thursday afternoon."

### *Three weeks later*

Interest and enthusiasm for the Chavez service-learning project has almost evaporated. Each Friday the students complain more. Attendance is 30% worse on Friday than any other day in the week. It is taking almost twice as long to get the students to even walk to the project area. Students are starting to scheme about creating a Friday class boycott on Friday, March 10, to end the project before they have to do any more work or have to go to the April city council meeting.

### **Workshop Tasks**

- 1. Use the Youth Voice Meter to assess the Chavez Service-Learning Project.**
- 2. Using insights developed from your meter assessment, jot down two or three suggestions for how Steve and Sarah might have organized their project more effectively.**
- 3. Bonus Challenge: You are a consultant called in by Steve's principal to help Steve rescue his project. What advice would you give Steve and Sarah?**