

Service Learning – A Program in Process

Rabat American School

Our story begins with a student who is a new member of the Community Service Committee at Rabat American School. This Committee has been exploring service opportunities with the Temara Center for the Blind near Rabat.

When Saadia, a new 10th grade student member of our committee, first joined the committee, she was asked, “Why are you here?” Both of the new members, Saadia and Mariam are deeply committed to making a difference in the world. They are on EVERY service committee at RAS. They speak with genuine passion and devotion to giving of themselves so that others can be lifted up. Both girls are on scholarship. We have a high population of wealthy Moroccans at RAS and like many children of wealth, no matter the ethnicity, living a life of privilege isolates them from the realities of those less fortunate. Saadia and Mariam appreciate their modest privilege and are young women of ACTION.

What have these girls already contributed? They were translators for our meeting with the Director of the Temara Center for the Blind and their school’s English teacher. They bounced back and forth from French, Arabic and English. They listened with intense focus. They exhibited maturity and exuberance! They were ready to commit to starting their own English tutoring program after school independent of our committee!

Why did Saadia join this Committee?

“My name is Saadia, a 16 year old student in the sophomore class of the Rabat American School. I have been introduced to the Community Service World once I joined RAS. I must say that it was the best feature I received from this school, because it completed a part of me, of my personality. I started out very young in the 8th grade class by joining Community Service Clubs. It taught me about life, about what’s going on in the World. It got me out of my little bubble, of my little Golden prison, the world I live in protected by my parents and the school. I got face to face with reality. I learned about what’s going on in my country, what people needed. I knew that I had to do something, to help out, to contribute in the needy people’s world. Maybe one person can’t change the world and their state, but at least I know that I draw a smile on someone’s face when I do something big or little. Because service learning has changed my life, and made me a better, stronger, more informed person, I want other people to join in and make this World if not a better place, a place of awareness that people are in need. I most definitely do not consider community service as a requirement or as a way to show universities that I am a well rounded student; I do service because I am human, with feelings and a heart that not only feels but thinks of the better.

“I recently got introduced to the school of the Blind in the service learning committee at my school. I thought of it as a great opportunity to try out a new kind of service. When the principal of that school talked to us, he gave us many service opportunities to join, such as tutoring, coaching, raising money to buy special school supplies, etc... I believe it will be a good connection to introduce to the school and to get my fellow students to join. I am looking forward to this opportunity.”

Rabat American School is in the process of integrating service learning as a teaching method. We are all committed to moving away from the bake-sale mentality of serving our community in those one-shot gestures of helping out the less fortunate without really SEEING them. We aim to move toward sustainable connections for our school with many layers of opportunity; this may still include raising funds for a Braille printer at the school, however to connect academic classes with the experiences students have in the community, to increase their ability to think through the process will advance all our ambitions for preparing students as successful graduates of RAS.

Teacher Alex Dailey shares her thoughts and experience as she participates in this transformation. “As teachers we've all endured passionless PowerPoint presentations with kids stumbling carelessly through content mostly digested unthinkingly from the Internet. We've read tedious papers that consciously use strong verbs to communicate a point that kids care little about. We've heard persuasive speeches on topics disconnected from student lives, interests and curiosity. In addition, many of us have stood with our kids behind the counter of a bake sale to sell off goods, the proceeds of which will be sent off anonymously with the click of a button. We've stood with our students while we awkwardly hand over collected items to thankful but essentially anonymous people represented by little known agencies.

“My hope is that our proposed ongoing, school-wide connection to the Temara Blind Center will mark a shift from these old habits, both academic and service-oriented. The beauty of service learning is the application and cultivation of academic and social skills to meaningful real-world situations while all participants benefit. Because the outcomes of these interactions are authentically connected to personal relationships in the real world (rather than simply numbers in a grade book), we hope that our students will delve into deeper experiential learning and a consequent higher-quality demonstration of skills and understanding acquired.

“On a more limited basis, I have already witnessed this dynamic in action in my work with National Honor Society (NHS) at Lincoln School in Kathmandu, Nepal. After more than a year of monthly afternoon trips to the orphanage to eat and play together, NHS members wanted to deepen their commitment. They challenged themselves to raising approximately \$3000 to pay the tuition of each orphan. NHS members' Powerpoint -- presented on UN Day to ambassadors, dignitaries, parents and students -- was breath-taking and resulted in significant contributions towards the funds we were committed to raise. Letters of thanks, request and information were conscientiously revised and edited to put forth our best effort. Students made convincing personal pitches to various service organizations and individuals who we thought might support our cause. My students even had the opportunity to participate as assistants to a dentist we recruited to come up and do basic cleaning, fillings and extractions for the kids. Certainly then, this effort supported my students' academic skills in terms of public speaking, presentation, expository and persuasive writing and professional awareness. Moreover, my privileged students absorbed a broader understanding of Nepali culture -- from the Nepali dance that several of the girls shared, to basic language skills, to the experience of sitting cross-legged on the floor eating dal baat with your hands.

“How did I motivate all this effort as the leader of NHS? Another weekend visit to the orphanage or a day of play together on our luxurious campus was all that was needed. Having observed the power of that service learning experience in Kathmandu, I am hopeful that RAS may reap even greater benefits by implementing a sustainable K-12 program with ongoing opportunities and academic connections at each level. The momentum gained through one small group's extra-curricular effort in Kathmandu was already significant; to expand that to an entire school's effort consciously integrated through academic content could yield even more substantial results.”

Rabat American School missions and beliefs as laid out in our strategic plan and one of two objectives in our accreditation for growth protocol, state we believe that “every student should develop a strong sense of civic and environmental responsibility.” This shows our school is well aligned philosophically with the premises of service learning.

According to the school wide interest, a community partnership with The Temara School for the Blind makes sense. This school was established in 1986 and is funded by the Royal Family. The school is run by the Ministry of Education. Students come from the northwest region of Morocco. Education and board are free. They serve 180 kids; 150 board on campus and 50 stay for the

weekend while others return to their families. Ages range from 6-20 with 45% girls and 55% boys. Students range from partially sighted to blind. The school has vans for transportation.

Already we have verified their needs as follows, and have begun to consider how our academic programs could respond:

English language support to develop oral skills. This could be done via games, sports, crafts, music, socializing as well as more directed pedagogical activities. Students, after learning about the abilities of students could design the activities and lessons.

Handwriting support: Students primary means of written language communication is Braille. We are not clear as to how our RAS students could help meet the teachers needs of having students learn to write in English, Arabic, and French so this would require further investigation and research – by students.

Teacher to Teacher support: Teachers would appreciate the opportunity to observe our teachers to learn strategies to expand their students speaking ability. Our students could also work collaboratively with the teachers to develop audio tools for modeling speaking skills.

Funding: They have a Braille printed but need the paper. It is very expensive. They would also like more resources for the library.

Our Next Steps: We will proceed with a site visit and seek more opportunities for clubs and classes to find meaningful ways to be productive in ways that develop mutual respect and understanding. For example, the teacher of a class on Moroccan Studies/Technology is interested in connecting the ceramics component of the course to the Center by establishing one-to-one partnerships with visually impaired students and the 6th grade. Emphasize will also be on the language learning component in hopes of persuading the director that such an activity could be integrated into the regular school day. The lesson will need to be translated into French.

Elementary teachers discussed how sensory perception is a part of the primary curriculum; some teachers also explore disabilities. These lessons might provide a curricular bridge to a service experience with the center. The 12-2 mid-day pause might provide a time for students to eat and share together.

What is most exciting is that our two communities all share the vision of creating a meaningful, sustainable connection that will enrich the lives of all involved.

We are on our way!

Alicia Mendoza and Alex Dailey
For the Rabat American School