

Rethinking service learning by rethinking community



Glennon Sweeney, senior research associate at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University, tells students about the history of neighborhood redlining and racially restrictive covenants in Columbus.

Derek Burtch, Erase the Space co-founder; teacher, Olentangy Local (Delaware)

There are many seductive stories about service learning projects aimed at improving educational standards and outcomes in “underserved” schools. These stories tell of students helping their peers in different areas through various projects, but one thread seams through most of them. One group is being served, and the other is serving. These projects reinforce the same power dynamics impeding real community collaboration. Someone is positioned to be served, and someone is positioned to serve.

The miss here — and let me be clear, it is a *big* miss — is the systemic ignorance of the value brought by all communities. The structure of these service programs and savior classrooms exist because our national narrative encourages this structure:

a structure that values white voices and wealth more than connecting with all possible perspectives and listening to and engaging with all members of our communities.

This is especially true for students and is why my fellow co-founder, **Amelia Gordon**, and I created Erase the Space — a collaboration between **Columbus City’s** South High School and **Olentangy Local’s (Delaware)** Liberty High School. It’s a yearlong writing exchange incorporating letter writing, digital communication about shared learning around a social issue and an in-person collaborative project addressing the social issue. We hope to break down barriers between students living in the same metro area but attending very different — and segregated — schools.

Students in America’s public schools, specifically in metropolitan areas across the country, are still attending segregated schools. The first step to community involvement is for students to imagine themselves as a member of a larger community, one outside the walls of their school. Our students have school district barriers between them limiting their concept of their “community” and also limiting *what* they can be involved in as their options are often limited to their school community. This student-to-student barrier limits community engagement for young people living no more than 5 miles apart and hinders collective action.

The barriers between students across the Midwest reflect the communities at large. Through discriminatory housing policy, local court battles over *Brown v. Board of Education* and angry white protestors, the Midwest remains as segregated today as it was in 1954 when the U.S. declared “separate but equal” unconstitutional. In the Columbus, Ohio, metro area, where our work currently centers, these “community-to-community” barriers have been amplified through the “win-win” agreement between Columbus City Schools and suburban districts in 1986 and the economic crisis of 2008.

As of 2014, Columbus was ranked the 20th most racially segregated city in the country and was ranked second among cities with the highest economic segregation, according to the Martin Prosperity Institute report, *Segregated City: The Geography of Economic Segregation in America’s Metros*. Again, these barriers between communities stem from the one place citizens are supposed to learn about community: schools.

Schools also are where much of this inequity is created. Not just in funding, but in narrative. These deeply ingrained, racist narratives govern which schools are “good” and which are “bad.” Schools have what is known as “symbolic capital” that pervades the narrative surrounding all schools and the students they serve. Symbolic capital, coined by the sociologist **Pierre Bourdieu**, refers to the status or value that a name brings to the places and people connected to that place.

The narrative of our public schools rests on symbolic value; it is based on the race and socioeconomic status of the students enrolled. Do not let puffed-up test scores tell you different. The narrative structure that governs who gets to live where and who gets to go to what schools is the same narrative that presents such a stark contrast between those in service and those being served in service learning projects. But, to rethink service learning, we have to first rethink the idea of community.

Our students have to cross boundaries outside of their siloed, segregated schools and redefine community for themselves. Erase the Space provides this opportunity for students in the central Ohio area. Through our program, students in segregated classrooms engage in a yearlong writing exchange that culminates with an in-person meeting at a neutral

location where students work together on a solution to a shared social issue. Students voluntarily engage with a partner from another school — generally from two schools that have perceived differences to navigate — in shared learning about an issue facing both communities. This brings students from segregated schools together to reimagine the world, understand who belongs at the table, which of course, is everyone, and engages students in meaningful democratic discourse.

We choose a neutral location for our work because of the symbolic capital associated with schools. The narrative of the haves and have-nots is a major factor in creating educational inequity and, inevitably, one group is left feeling better or guilty about its situation and the other is left feeling worse about its situation. Three Miles, from the show “This American Life” on NPR, illustrates this phenomenon.



In the 2018 writing exchange, students from Olentangy Local’s Liberty High School and Columbus City’s South High School present their idea to bring together young people from different backgrounds.

Holding the student meetup at a public place, such as a library, reinforces the idea of an expanded community and allows us to try our best to vacuum out the existing power dynamics between students, at least with the physical space. This also creates an opportunity for the students learning to break through the barrier between communities and themselves and define their collaborative roles together because it relies less on the incomplete picture provided by service learning narratives.

One of the more common questions we field from possible funders, parents, other teachers and school administrators is: “What do they do with their idea after the project?” That is up

to our students. We provide opportunities for alumni of the program to participate in border-crossing opportunities, but they are looking for democratic work to do together beyond the exchange, and we do not have the capacity to fill that need.

However, we do know that people in the community are eager to work with young people and share their passion. Many of the nonprofits we have worked with lament that they have trouble engaging young people in their work. We saw this as another opportunity to break barriers: the barrier between the community and students.

Through our work in growing Erase the Space, we have connected with other people in Columbus doing similar work. As our network grew, community partners asked us how to best engage young people in their work. Our answer: “Ask them.”



Brainstorming gets messy early on in the exchange, but the idea this group came up with led to a real-life scavenger hunt for students.

The first thing to do if we want to invite young people into community work is value their voice. Too often, adults seeking student participation find observer roles for them to fill: “Hey, come check out what I do. But just sit there and don’t mess anything up.” However, even those organizations that are seeking meaningful participation from young people have difficulty engaging them in the work.

So how do we challenge the current service learning structure and expand our perception of community? By providing students with opportunities for true collaboration. We let them discuss how this happens without our comfortable social assents. A good place to start is to operate from this truth: All students have something to offer their community. But, this truth only stands tall if we also operate from the idea that citizens from all communities impacted by social issues bring equal value to discussions and decision-making.

You can start on a personal note: Recognize the intricate and

interconnected history of public policy and private enterprise and the role each played in producing our past and current school segregation. Then, tell other people about it. And invest in teachers — and their time.

Teachers are the conduits through which all of this connection flows. Our students are yearning for opportunities to put their learning into action, and the connections to the community they need are a teacher away. We have seen alumni of our program create clubs to discuss race at their school, start and maintain a newsletter for the refugee and immigrant population in Columbus written in their home language and engage in a communal unpacking of Columbus’s history of racist housing policies. All of these projects started with one student and one community member — connected by a teacher.

This is not a plea for more work. Teachers teach, plan lessons, grade, advise, council and listen all day long, and that is just the student half of the job. Gordon and I did this work as full-time teachers for three years, and it nearly led to burnout. We are lucky to have a grant backing our work so I can continue to teach in a part-time capacity while supporting teachers facilitating other writing exchanges across the Columbus metro area. A “part-time teacher/part-time community activist” is not a position that is widely available, though some districts in the area have positions called teacher on special assignment.

What if there were an easier path for this type of position to exist?

What if districts offered this type of position to teachers?

What if multiple teachers in a metro area were doing relational work between communities on behalf of their district with district funds?

What if we expand our idea of community beyond our district borders? What if the service and savior dynamic transforms into a “we” dynamic?

I do not have definitive answers to the above questions. I do, however, know that the barriers between our students and between communities will not be broken down by doing nothing. ■

About the author: Derek Burtch teaches language arts and journalism at Olentangy Local’s Liberty High School. He created the project that would eventually become Erase the Space with Amelia Gordon, a former English teacher at Columbus City’s South High School, in 2017. Since then, they have been working to bring this opportunity to other students and teachers in central Ohio, made possible this year through the Connect and Collaborate Program at Ohio State University.