

■ GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE ■

SOCIAL EDUCATION

LENDING A HELPING HAND OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Students better understand the world around them when they take part in volunteer work or lead initiatives to address social problems, writes **John Cremer**



Exam results matter, but as leading schools in Hong Kong are always quick to point out, their job is to provide a holistic education which allows students to develop all-round talents, understand their place in the world, and find a preferred path in life.

In part, that is done by creating opportunities to learn outside the classroom, including through involvement in volunteer work, community activities and environment-related projects.

For those in the lower years, the starting point could be anything from putting in a few hours at a beach clean-up or tree-planting scheme to performing a seasonal concert at a residential home for retirees.

For senior students, particularly those meeting the CAS (creativity, activity, service) requirement of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP), the scope tends to be far more ambitious. Individuals and groups commit to initiatives that can range from organising fundraising events and campaigning for change to teaching children from underprivileged families and, when conditions allow, helping to build village schools in rural Thailand.

In each case, of course, the aim is to do something positive and make a worthwhile contribution, however small or large it may be.

But to go with that, there is also the vital element of learning about life, gaining new insights and experiences, and realising that even one person, with the right approach and motivation, can be a force for good.

"Community work provides opportunities for students to make a difference in their world and learn that they can influence positive change in the lives of others," said Simon Misso-Veness, deputy principal and head of the English International Stream at German Swiss International School (GSIS). "Also, as a school, one of our aims is to sustain meaningful connections with the Hong Kong community and ensure that through our collective actions we make a positive impact."

Within the main curriculum, he noted, the CAS module provides a handy framework for volunteer work. All students taking the IBDP must demonstrate involvement in one or more chosen projects over the course of 18 months and submit regular progress reports.

Along the way, they receive plenty of guidance from the school's CAS coordinator and advisers who offer suggestions and prompt reflection on what each individual has learned.

Overall there are intended to be seven learning outcomes. These range from identifying one's own strengths and developing new skills, to planning

effectively, showing perseverance, and engaging with issues of global significance. There is also a strong focus on recognising the ethics of choices and actions.

"Besides that, we also have a large number of pre-IBDP students who conduct service activities," Misso-Veness said. "Their projects are largely self-generated, and each of the secondary school's four houses supports a selected charity every year, with students organising events to raise funds."

The current beneficiaries are Refugee Union, Eco Drive, Make a Wish and Kids 4 Kids. And, when necessary, the school's global initiatives coordinator is always ready to assist in contacting charities and community groups, assessing potential risks, reviewing logistics and checking publicity materials.

"However, the onus is very much on the students to initiate projects, liaise with chosen organisations, and plan the fundraising or service strategy," Misso-Veness said.

"When they first start working with external agencies, there tends to be a focus on raising money through activities like bake sales, which are a great way of generating funds, but can lose impact over time. So, we have asked students to explore a range of alternative ways to generate resources or build awareness, such as making

Students from Canadian International School hosted a conference to discuss the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Photo: Handout

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Volunteer students from French International School. Photo: Handout

jewellery and running coordinated drives to collect much-needed supplies,” he said.

Indeed, one recent school-wide food drive provided essential support for Feeding HK. The team involved spread their message during three assemblies and via a sustained “advertising” campaign shown on the school’s television screens. Similar drives are now in the works to collect and pass on clothes, for Redress, and books, for Rebooked and Room to Read.

As Covid-related restrictions relax, GSIS also plans to ramp up its annual “discovery week”, a comprehensive programme with Hong Kong-based NGOs like Crossroads, Africa Centre, Hope International and the Asia Society.

Previously, these tie-ups made it possible for student groups to travel overseas to help construct houses in Cambodia, schools in northern Thailand and community buildings in Laos. There were also regular trips to the Philippines to work on coral reef preservation, and the hope is to reinstate these sort of initiatives once the all-clear is given.

“Through assemblies and our outward-looking community projects, we continue to encourage students to adopt a mindset that is focused on social responsibility and helping others,” Misso-Veness said. “Many of our students live a fairly comfortable, privileged life here in Hong Kong. So, our focus on service learning looks to build empathy and awareness of the needs of others, as well as to contribute to the community. It also allows us to uphold the IB mission which seeks to develop knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create ‘a better and more peaceful world’ through education and intercultural understanding,” he said.

In similar vein, the French International School (FIS) has taken core IBDP principles and built on them to come up with a varied volunteer programme that promotes a commitment to service and gets students thinking about what they care about and stand for.

There are options to suit every personality type. So, those who are more sporty can coach junior football, while anyone who wants to help the more vulnerable in society can do something hands-on such as distributing basic necessities to the homeless during “kindness walks”. Some activities are one-offs, for instance selling poppies for the Royal British Legion, while others such as supporting the LGBT+ Alliance club can extend over weeks or months.

“One of the obvious benefits of volunteering is that students gain a much sharper understanding of their abilities and of the world around them,” said Elise Rickford, university counsellor and IBDP core specialist at FIS. “For example, they find that teaching and

coaching is harder than it looks and thus quickly realise that they have to develop their own planning and communication skills. It also makes students reconsider stereotypical views they may hold,” she said.

The first step is often to volunteer within the school, perhaps running clubs, supporting younger children in the primary section, or acting as teaching assistants. But at IBDP level, the norm is to team up with a local NGO and do anything from coaching hockey for disabled people to working in soup kitchens or teaching English to recent immigrants.

In the lead-up to Christmas, there is always extra demand for willing hands to help out at fairs and craft workshops for kids. And members of the FIS community are generally counted among the first to sign up.

“Students can choose activities linked to their interests, such as organising a charity sailing race,” Rickford said. “But they can also find something related

to a possible future career, especially if they are an aspiring medic or teacher.”

She added that schools like FIS have a responsibility to guide children to become active and compassionate citizens of the world. That entails opportunities to learn inside and outside the classroom and to take stock of each new experience.

“The temptation to go abroad to volunteer is always there, but it is important – and potentially more beneficial to our students – to engage with local issues,” Rickford said.

For Matthew Schulte, head of local and global engagement at the Canadian International School of Hong Kong (CDNIS), the key to a successful service learning project is to engage with real-world environmental and social issues and to meet clearly articulated objectives.

It helps too if volunteer activities are directly linked to the core curriculum. But the main thing is to inspire meaningful participation, so that knowledge and skills acquired in class can be applied to addressing problems beyond the school gate.

“The vast majority of our community engagement initiatives are proudly student-led, and in the upper school we currently have 17 ‘global goals clubs’ each working on one or more of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals,” Schulte said. “The clubs run regular advocacy, awareness and fundraising campaigns that include guest speaker series, thought-provoking debates and poverty simulations, as well as a range of opportunities for direct community service,” he said.

Current examples include preparing and cooking meals for the needy with partner organisations, taking part in literacy programmes, supporting displaced people and running donation drives.

Last year’s lower school Christmas donation drive collected over 450kg of food items for recipients in Sham Shui Po, and 750 festive gift boxes were sent to children in Hong Kong, Cambodia and the Philippines.

“In other respects, our Grade 9 and 10 civics course explores what it means to be an informed, responsible citizen in the local, national and global arenas,” Schulte said. “And for the CAS element of the IBDP, all students undertake a self-directed service project, typically volunteering with aged care facilities, animal shelters, language centres or NGOs.

“As a result some adopt more sustainable practices, conducting park or beach clean-ups and waste audits, while others design innovative solutions for environmental and social problems,” he said. “The evidence shows that students who engage in volunteer service benefit academically, socially and emotionally, while also supporting a genuine community need.”



Students from Canadian International School taking part in a beach clean-up. Photo: Handout