

FLExing Minds

Trinity Christian School takes academics to new heights by volunteering in the community every other week.

By Celia Jiménez

Helping to beautify neighborhoods, packing food at the food bank, building a greenhouse and spending time with the elderly are all popular community service activities. For high school students at Trinity Christian School in Monterey, they are also part of the curriculum.

This curriculum is called FLEx Wednesdays, for Formational Learning Experiences. Instead of attending academic classes, high schoolers spend three hours every other Wednesday volunteering in their community.

The school is classified as a Teaching for Transformation school, a program in which teachers and students participate in real projects and get involved.

"It's putting the kids in a position where they actually are serving a real need that exists," Principal Rick Fitzgerald says. "They're learning about not only that topic and not only who they're helping, but they're learning as much about themselves."

Every year, teachers and staff discuss which projects they will include for FLEx day. They also send out a survey in the neighborhood asking neighbors about their needs and how students can

help them out. They collaborate with different organizations, including Meals on Wheels, Food Bank for Monterey County, Monterey Bay Charter School and Pacific Grove Senior Living.

Some projects are more physical, such as gardening or beach cleanups; others focus more on academics, like helping homeschool kids catch up with math.

"It extends learning into a whole different level."

Megan Ryan, director of student life, says they encourage students to sign up for activities they like, but since they are young, "We're also trying to encourage them to try something new or try something different so they're not comfortable all the time."

The school combines learning, service and critical thinking in its curriculum. Once students return to school from a project, they share their experiences or write an essay for their class.

"There are a lot of students here that live in a bubble," says Hannah Britain, a biology teacher.

Britain runs different FLEx projects,



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As part of FLEx Wednesdays, students from Trinity Christian School in Monterey volunteered at the Food Bank for Monterey County on May 8. Students work with different organizations every other week as part of their curriculum.

trying to break out of the bubble. One is volunteering at the food bank, while the most recent activity was putting together birthday cake kits.

Her students organized a fundraiser and assembled 50 kits that each included a disposable tin, a can of soda (to use instead of eggs), frosting, balloons and candles. They delivered them to the food bank on Wednesday, May 8.

Another project Britain heads up twice a year is at Pacific Grove Senior Living. Students are paired with a resident to chat and get to know each other. At the end, they hold a reception where each participant reads the biographies they wrote about the resident they interacted with.

While FLEx days have become part of the school routine, some students were unsure about them in the beginning.

"I was not excited for FLEx, I actually thought I would like academics more than going out and doing this," Desiree Peraza says. Over time, Peraza changed her mind, noting volunteering regularly has helped her to overcome her shyness:

"It got me out of my comfort zone."

Tito Gonzalez-Perez, a high school senior, participates in gardening projects and uses the skills he learned from his grandfather, who owns a landscaping business, to mentor younger students.

The teenagers say FLEx Wednesdays are a platform for team-building and bringing students from different grades together.

Students learn during the hands-on experiences, and the experiences also apply in the classroom. During English class, they read the classic American novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* and discussed inequalities and racial injustice. Then they took it a step further and researched organizations that address injustices in America and picked the Innocence Project of New Orleans. The class raised \$200 for the organization and also spoke with the CEO to learn how, as teenagers, they could address injustice in their community.

"It's a traditional book that a lot of schools would read, but [FLEx] extends the learning into a whole different level," Fitzgerald says. ★



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