MEMORANDUM

To: Service-Learning Community Partners
From: Jon Schmidt, Manager – Democracy Education and Student Leadership
Date: November 15, 2012
Re: Service-Learning Graduation Requirement

Chicago Public Schools has had a service-learning graduation requirement in place since 1999. During that time, we have learned a lot about the best ways to complete the graduation requirement. I have heard a lot from students, teachers, coaches, and community partners over the years about the meaning, value, and practice of service-learning. All of our research and learning suggests that service-learning is best when it is directly connected with classroom learning (Billig et al). Many students have said that they enjoy the opportunity to participate in service-learning projects that are part of their classroom learning. Many teachers have indicated they see academic, civic and social growth among their students through service-learning.

Students tell me these experiences help them to learn classroom content at a deeper level. They enjoy working with their peers on interesting service projects, and they appreciate the opportunity to participate in service projects that help them make sense of classroom content. They also think it’s more fun and interesting working in community with their teacher and classmates.

We’ve been listening to students, teachers, and community organizations and paying attention to the research. Beginning with this year’s freshmen and sophomores, Chicago Public Schools is no longer counting hours toward the graduation requirement. Instead, the new graduation requirement is to complete three projects. Each project must be part of an organized experience that directly connects to what students are learning and doing in the classroom. For example, students might learn about biodiversity in the classroom and then help restore natural sites at the Chicago River, Lake Michigan, or a forest preserve. Students might be learning about the Great Depression in the classroom then serve at a shelter, food pantry or food depository. Students might be learning about our electoral system then serve as an election judge, campaign worker or motor voter registrar. I hope and trust that you’ll join the more than 1,000 CPS teachers who enliven, deepen, and extend learning with students through service-learning. Whether you are working with students and teachers to help deepen understanding of Romeo and Juliet, principles of biodiversity, graphing and statistics, food vocabulary, electoral politics, civil rights movement, or the arts, we believe service-learning can continue to be part of your organization.

While we will no longer count or grant credit for hours earned in isolation, we will strongly encourage students to continue volunteering in the community. We think it’s good for them and most definitely good for the community. But we are an educational enterprise and our primary goal is to provide educational opportunities for our students. We think service-learning is a great strategy to meet numerous academic and civic goals. We hope you’ll work with our Service-Learning Coaches to develop project opportunities with our teachers and students. It’s good fun and has the potential to transform lives.