



By Kimberly Vallejo

Room to Read

Helping your children change the world, through the power of education

PARENTS AND EDUCATORS everywhere want the same things for their kids; that they grow up to be healthy and happy, safe and loved. We work hard to ensure they have access to important formative life experiences, the latest technological tools, and a top notch education. The demands to stay abreast of the latest child-rearing techniques or educational research can be simply daunting, but we tackle it all head-on in the hopes that our children will achieve great things and make an impact on the world around them. And, by and large, they will; for we are the lucky ones, having won the lottery of life. Our children, unlike so many others around the world, live in a place where schools are readily accessible, where learning to read is not a "nice-to-have" and where our girls are encouraged to dream the same dreams and reach for the same aspirations as our boys. Knowing such a dichotomy of access to education exists in the world, we are faced with a challenge—how do we understand our role as global citizens, and perhaps more importantly, how do we help our kids to do the same?

"EDUCATING THE MIND WITHOUT EDUCATING THE HEART IS NO EDUCATION AT ALL."

—Aristotle

Giving our children exposure to a global education helps them prepare for life in a world that is becoming ever more closely connected. As today's children grow up, they will compete

for jobs in a global market, collaborate with colleagues from a diverse array of cultures and nationalities and navigate networks that span the globe. The skills children need to develop today to succeed in that future are vastly different from those needed just a decade or so ago. Generally referred to as "21st century skills," these are founded less upon specific content knowledge and more so upon the ways we learn to think and interact with one another in our daily lives. Being creative and adapting to change, tackling complexity and relying on collaboration are just a few of the skills recognized as helping to prepare our kids for life in a global society. Additionally, today's youth must develop strong communication skills and above all, empathy. In a world of networks so tightly knit, the advantages of understanding society as split between "us and them," is rapidly dissipating. Today's youth will learn that the problems of the world affect us all, despite however far away they seem.

This kind of learning happens as much within as outside of the classroom. Parents and teachers alike hold the power to engage kids in the kinds of activities that help them to develop and hone these important life skills. An effective method to get your kids actively involved in developing these skills and increasing their global awareness is to engage them in global service and philanthropy.

Many families across the U.S. are already involved in

philanthropic giving. But, not all families involve their children in philanthropy in formative ways; by challenging their children to explore global social issues and empowering them to make a difference by deciding where to invest their time, talents and treasure. At *Room to Read*, a San Francisco based non-profit working in literacy and girls' education in the developing world, investors increasingly want to learn how they can get their whole family involved in supporting our cause. Teachers and school administrators are also reaching out, looking to connect their students to our work, knowing that getting kids involved in social issues and the non-profit sector will help develop the next generation of global leaders. We recognize the commitment and power of youth to change the world and have responded with a program called Students Helping

Students. We know that by engaging kids, classrooms and entire families in our work, we are engendering global citizens who not only understand the complex social problems we face today, but are equipped with the impetus to solve them.

Last year, a group of students from Sparta Middle School in New Jersey were inspired to support our work in Sri Lanka. They began with an educational exercise, researching the country and their need for educational support. As they discovered more about the history and current affairs of the small nation, they became mobilized, organizing bake sales, selling bracelets adorned with the motto "Read for the Need" to coincide with their read-a-thon, organizing a "math-a-thon" to raise funds and even using online tools to experiment with translating their work into Sinhalese (one of the official languages of Sri Lanka). Through these collective efforts, the students raised \$3,000 to support our library program, providing training for librarians along with books, games and furnishings to libraries in Sri Lanka. A portion of these funds were also set aside to send a girl to school for a year. Equally as impactful, these students had the unique experience of spending entire year learning about the lives of their less fortunate peers and taking action to improve educational opportunity on the other side of the world.

Since 2004, when the Students Helping Students program first launched, we've seen kids similar to the young

philanthropists in New Jersey readily putting their skills to work in innovative ways to make a difference. High school students have built nonprofit tutoring clubs to support literacy locally and abroad. By charging a "fee" and then remitting it to Room to Read, these entrepreneurial groups ensure that young children everywhere develop good habits of reading. Younger children are also getting involved; hosting read-a-thons to raise money and energizing their own love of reading to ensure that kids elsewhere have access to quality education.

To date, more than 1,000 school groups, spanning 35 different countries, have supported our work through the program. By getting involved, students learn about different global cultures, support education in the developing world and also practice critical 21st century skills. The program intentionally gives students the space to lead and to innovate in how they choose to support our work. The Students Helping Students program website, www.roomtoread.org/students, offers students a number of tools they can use to support Room to Read through awareness and fundraising. But ultimately, how they employ these tools is entirely self-directed. We encourage students to collaborate within the Students Helping Students network, to connect on social media and to learn from others to build their projects. While in the end most projects look different from one another, the experience is generally the same. Through getting involved, students begin to reflect on their own privilege and gain an appreciation for the opportunities they've been afforded. They also develop a deeper understanding of what life is like for millions of other students around the world. This understanding then builds to empathy as kids relate to youth in faraway places based on a common life experience—being a student. Finally, this connection fuels students to take action. It is through this action that our kids become empowered to exercise their voice and to make a difference on behalf of global issues like illiteracy and gender inequality.

While much of the student action we see here at Room to Read is grassroots and student led, there is no denying the important role that parents and teachers play in encouraging kids to get involved and give back. Through modeling and direct engagement, adults can encourage kids to see their lives as a part of a very global experience. Involving kids in discussions of philanthropy and actions of service empowers them to face the 21st century head-on, to achieve great things and to make the world a better place. Getting them involved in support of education in the developing world has a unique multiplicative effect, empowering not only our own kids but also millions of others around the world, to do the same. ●

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