

New Haven’s Off-Campus Classroom’s Civics Project

Students from the New Haven Off-Campus-Classroom (OCC) program participated in a service-learning program to learn about the State of Connecticut’s legislative process. OCC students served by reporting to peers at Wilbur Cross High School information learned from their research and field trip to the Connecticut Capitol. The OCC program has a clear mission, “To provide students who have been identified with intellectual disabilities with an age appropriate alternative-high school education experience, which promotes independence and lifelong learning through the use of community based vocational, independent living and social integration activities.”



OCC students on tour of Connecticut’s Capitol building in Hartford (January 2006).

OCC students worked with their special-education teachers on several campuses to create a service-learning plan for the entire student group. It was a goal for participants to gain an understanding of the state legislative process, the issues addressed by the legislature, ways to communicate with representatives and methods to travel to the Capitol via public transportation. Some of the students had never ridden on a train before. Students generated research questions to be answered by this project and determined their service was to create an information board at Wilbur Cross High School. This information board was designed to inform students at Wilbur Cross about the State Legislature and provide Wilbur Cross students answers to the student-generated questions relevant to the legislative process.

Student generated questions included themes such as, “What state programs support middle and low income students to enroll in post secondary education?” “How can a young person help make a difference in Connecticut?”

To plan the trip, OCC students were responsible for researching ways and costs of traveling to the Capitol, finding and determining train schedules, locating directions to and from train stations, identifying affordable places to eat in Hartford and creating a personal itinerary for the trip. Prior to the actual trip, teachers presented a 10-day unit on government functions, which included a virtual tour of the Capitol and lessons to recognize the distinction between local, state and federal government activities along with some specific Connecticut state history.

During the trip and after its completion, students recorded their findings in a Community Exploration Log. A tour guide brought the students into the General Assembly chambers where students got to sit at the desks of legislators and seek answers to their questions. There was also a video and photographic record of the trip that was shared with the OCC team during their May awards banquet. Students created the information board for Wilbur Cross from their Community Exploration Log notes and from the photographs taken during the trip.

This project was funded in part through the SASL (Student Activists for Service-Learning) youth philanthropy board and a project of YES (Youth: Ethics in Service). The SASL board commends the work of the OCC students and teachers to expand an understanding of practical civics and government.