A Bridges volunteer from St. Paul's School for Boys works with students on a park clean-up.

SERVICE TO OTHERS IS A YEAR-LONG PURSUIT FOR MANY LOCAL STUDENTS

FULLY ENGAGED

ARTICLE SUE DE PASQUALE | PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED
WHEN THANKSGIVING AND THE DECEMBER HOLIDAYS ARRIVE, MANY OF US START THINKING ABOUT WAYS TO GIVE BACK.

But for students at many local schools, the concept of giving back through service is a year-long proposition.

"Our hope is to instill a pattern of service, beginning in middle school," says Susie Ballenger, chaplain for St. Paul's School for Girls, an Episcopal school with a foundational commitment to social justice. "We really want our girls to be engaged in activities that provide lasting change for others."

At St. Paul's School for Girls, fifth-graders get together throughout the year to make casseroles and learn about the mission of Paul's Place, which is committed to improving the quality of life for people living in Southwest Baltimore. Sixth-graders grow herbs and other plants from seeds to support the work of Habitat for Humanity in Baltimore's Sandtown neighborhood. By Mother's Day in May, the pots of flowers and herbs are ready for delivery to new homeowners.

Seventh-graders make regular visits to Pickersgill Retirement Community in Towson, where they form bonds with elderly residents by chatting, playing games and taking oral histories. Eighth-graders engage in art projects and recreational activities with students at nearby Ridge Ruxton School, which serves young people ages 4 through 21 who have disabilities.

"We try to provide our students with a wide variety of service experiences so that by Upper School, they have a clearer sense of how they want to invest their time, energy and talents," Susie says.

Like many area high schools, St. Paul's Upper School has a service requirement—60 hours—for graduation.

"Most of our students far exceed that goal," she notes.

At St. Paul's, many Upper School students from both the boys' and girls' schools devote their service efforts to the Bridges program, which provides year-round support to Baltimore City public school students from third grade to early adulthood.

"We have about 100 high-school-age students per year at St. Paul's who volunteer for Bridges," says Executive Director Rob Paymer. "A lot of our volunteers really find their calling through Bridges."

Continued...
The long-term connections our volunteers make with Bridges students are really amazing and transformative—for both sets of kids. Launched at St. Paul’s in 1993, and now with a site at The Gilman School, Bridges provides year-round programs and support to students ages 9 to 22. Outcomes to date have been impressive: In recent years, 100 percent of participants from Baltimore have graduated from high school, and more than 90 percent have gone on to college.

While the results are worth celebrating, Rob says, “It’s also critical that students and volunteers, growing up in different communities, come to know and care about each other.”

That’s also the philosophy at Institute of Notre Dame, in Baltimore, where “every student experiences serving with people and not just for people,” says Siobhan Cooney, director of campus ministry.

One group of IND student volunteers travels each week to Moravia Park Elementary School to take part in the Refugee Youth Project, a program sponsored by Baltimore City Community College.

“Our IND students work with younger students who have come to America as refugees,” Siobhan says. “They play together, do homework together and most importantly, they form bonds. Watching my students connect with the children is a joy. They truly learn from one another.”
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