

Banking time for schools - 23 Jun 2011

Timebanking is a scheme which links local people to share their time and skills for the benefit of all. SecEd columnist Karen Sullivan reports on the benefits the programme can and is bringing to school communities

Karen Sullivan

What would you think of a programme that was designed to create an alternative currency within your school and local community that was every bit as real as conventional money?

What if this currency formed part of a wider programme that would engage students, improve the dynamic and ethos of your school, develop firm links with neighbouring businesses, services and residents, encourage high self-esteem in your pupils, as well as reduce bullying, improve test scores and attendance, and facilitate a wider range of cultural, extra-curricular and educational opportunities?

What if the programme would take only a few short weeks to implement, cost next to nothing to run, and gave your school and students access to a constant stream of valuable and useful services without them having to spend a penny?

This programme is called Timebanking; it is not new, but its time has most certainly come.

Timebanking explained

Timebanking UK has been promoting Timebanking for several years as a new and exciting way for people to come together to help others and help themselves at the same time.

Participants “deposit” their time in the bank by giving practical help and support to others, and are able to “withdraw” their time when they need something done themselves.

Time banks record and value all the different kinds of help and everyday skills we can offer each other. In a time bank, everyone becomes both a giver and a receiver, and everyone’s time is valued equally: one hour of time spent helping others earns one time credit, which can buy one hour of help when it is needed.

Social relevance

With budget cuts putting pressure on schools to make ends meet, and necessitating the reduction of programmes within and outside the curriculum, the need for an

alternative approach to “buying in” services and creating clubs, after-school activities and enrichment opportunities for students has become increasingly pressing.

Martin Simon is the founder of Timebanking in the UK, and he believes that this programme has a host of benefits that have never been so relevant. Timebanking has been successfully used in many schools across the Western world, and is becoming increasingly popular in times of recession, community disintegration and disaffected youth.

Mr Simon believes that Timebanking has broader social implications, too – helping young people to resist the lure of passive “here and now consumption” by experiencing the tangible benefits of freely giving and receiving skills within expanding social networks.

He told me: “Timebanking can also connect young people more to the places where they live and help them to form relationships with older people and people from different backgrounds in a new form of ‘extended family’, where everyone has a part to play and everyone is valued equally for their contributions.

“Timebanking helps communities come together and enhance their own legitimacy, capacity and authority to resolve their own problems.

“Schools can be the incubators for this. Not only this, of course, but they and their students, teachers and parent population can be the direct recipients of its benefits.”

Timebanking in schools

The general idea is that Timebanking would work both within the school community for individuals (and/or groups) and also for the wider local community – with individuals, community groups and the school as a whole reaping the rewards.

So, students could earn time credits within the school for anything from tutoring younger students and helping in the lunchroom to offering computer support to students, teachers or parents and working in the library.

The programme can go further – into the community where students can help elderly people (gardening, shopping, accompanying them to doctor’s appointments). They can help to improve the community itself by landscaping public spaces or by guerrilla gardening, cleaning up graffiti, or helping out in local organisations and at community events. All sectors of the community can be engaged and students could, for example, run a monthly quiz, or play board games with the residents at a sheltered housing scheme.

The time bank is simply a way to match unmet needs with unused resources.

And this is only the beginning. As an important part of the school population, parents, too, can become involved – helping out in the school on any level, such as teaching skills to students in specialist clubs or lessons, co-ordinating activities, or acting as ambassadors and encouraging other local organisations to get involved in Timebanking.

Wherever there are under-used services and spare capacity, the owners or managers can be offered the opportunity to fulfil their responsibilities to support community life by donating free access and reductions in the cost of services. These can be passed on to time bank members as rewards and incentives. The parents would also be rewarded in time credits for their efforts, hour-for-hour.

Also, time credits earned can be used for the benefit of the whole school or the individual. For example, a student who spends two hours helping out in the community may wish to spend his credits attending a local football match. Equally, he may combine his time credits with those of his peers and “buy” an activity weekend away.

Students may decide to put a proportion of their credits into a school community pot so that those in the school or the wider community not so well placed to earn time credits can use them to “buy in” the services they need; parents may choose to use their credits to “fund” their children’s out-of-school activities, or simply to improve the school.

How does it work?

Students list all of the skills that they think they could enjoy sharing with others. Time, rather than money, is then used as a medium of exchange between the members – one hour of any skill is rewarded by one time credit which is recorded electronically at the time bank in the person’s account and can then be used to pay for an hour of one of the skills on offer from the other members.

This local currency therefore only values the activities that local people want to see happening and rewards people for social action, co-operation and caring activities.

As Mr Simon explained, people can donate their time credits to others and also exchange them for access to social, cultural, leisure or learning events, hour-for-hour. Access to the events is provided free by local institutions and socially responsible businesses to reward participation. Time banks often work with young people in groups and when they have earned sufficient time credits the group, rather than the individual, is rewarded with a trip.

There is a national online computer programme called Time-on-line available through Timebanking UK, which can be used to manage all of a time bank’s transactions, and schools can use it when they join.

Recent improvements mean that people can manage their own accounts, arrange exchanges and record tasks as they are completed online. People can also exchange services across the country between time banks.

Mr Simon says that there is scope for a new national “reciprocal exchange platform”, which would work in schools across the country, making the programme even more powerful.

Getting started

The first step is to accept a “strengths-based” approach to citizenship that recognises the biggest assets for building community links that the school has at its disposal are the students themselves.

This approach operates on the assumption that if you offer people the right tools, information and opportunities, they are able to build their communities better than anyone else. All interventions by the professionals from this point need to be aimed at activating the resources that are already there in any community – the skills, connections and knowledge of local people.

Then a conversation is then needed with the students, not about what they see as the problems, needs and deficiencies of their communities, but rather what do they care about enough to act on and what do they have to offer?

From these conversations, the school will be able to record details of the skills on offer, the motivational hooks and the wider concerns of the ultimate change agents – the young people in the community. This valuable resource can then be mobilised to transform the community. If staff time is available, it would be excellent to involve the parents at this stage and ask them to join in a strengths-based conversation. It may, however, be a more practical (and fruitful) option to pay the students in time credits once the time bank is established to carry out these interviews with parents.

It is sensible to experiment with Timebanking within the school walls and then to gradually move out into the wider community.

Staff at the school will need fully to support the programme and also be encouraged to join the time bank themselves. If, at the outset, some staff were to allocate 10 per cent of their time to involving new people and making the time bank work, then the school will swiftly become the beneficiary of hundreds of hours of valuable support from the local community.

Getting support

Word of mouth has always proven to be the best way to recruit people and to sign up organisations to offer rewards and incentives.

Once students have started earning and spending time credits they will be able to talk with authority about the mechanics and advantages of Timebanking, and young people can reach parts of the community that no others can. They can earn time credits for this work, and be supported when necessary by staff and parents. If there are other schools doing Timebanking in the area or other time banks working with other sectors of the community, then contact needs to be made, and skills and resources shared.

The local authority will be honour-bound to support your school’s time bank (no better example of the Big Society) while once the benefits are explained to them, local businesses should come on board.

A history of success

There have been many examples of time banks in schools. In Chicago, Albany and Lynn in the USA, disadvantaged older youth have earned “time dollars” tutoring younger students. These were cashed in for recycled computers, but the most amazing result was the improved test scores, attendance and morale of these students, young and old, and significant reductions in violence.

Here in the UK, the Time Schools project, funded by the Welsh Assembly, has been used successfully at a school in Cardiff and two other schools in South Wales.

A co-ordinator works at the schools one-day-a-week to promote time banks with “street teams”, which earned time credits for work on the school council, eco-club and after-school activities, among other things. Credits are spent on trips out, adventure weekends, and admission to an arts centre and rugby matches.

They report success in engaging “silent” students, and found that there was not only higher parental involvement in the school, but the kids themselves developed higher aspirations.

There is also the now-legendary EcoStars, based in Brixton, London, which began with three young, disadvantaged youths who set about earning time credits cultivating window boxes and any unused space they could find to grow food.

Credits earned are spent individually, or given to the members’ schools or organisations to spend. The most important benefit, however, has been the revived sense of community, the growth in self-esteem, self-value, confidence and sense of belonging.

Timebanking for the future

It is easy to see that the emotional benefits for the participants are potentially limitless – students become experts in their field, and respected for their skills and input; they develop closer links with other students and within the community, and are given a chance to “shine”.

Similarly, because this programme is student driven, the changes that take place within the school and community are those that the students perceive to be the most beneficial, and because they have something personal invested in their success, programmes are well attended, popular and, of course, self-sustaining. ▣

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