

Dear Fellow Educator,

This unit – Bringing Vocabulary to Life: Using Words to Help Our Homeless Children – uses service learning to engage students in explicit and systematic vocabulary instruction. Throughout this service learning project, students also have opportunities to master mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA) standards by writing letters, measuring blankets with nonstandard units of measurement, and collecting data about the types of clothes students donated. During the unit, students work to answer two essential questions: (a) How can I use vocabulary words in multiple contexts?, and (b) How can I support homeless children in Savannah? Because the second question requires students to discuss homelessness – a topic that, at first, may seem too heavy for first graders – I wanted to take a moment to address why it is important to discuss this issue with first graders, and how service learning enhances their mastery of the standards.

### **Why Discuss Homelessness?**

The students I teach live in an urban setting. While the students you teach may not live in a city like Savannah, chances are they have still encountered homelessness in some way. They may have seen a man holding a cardboard sign at a stoplight, or a woman sleeping on a bench in their neighborhood. Or, even closer to their world, a friend living in a homeless shelter or a family member living in a car. They might even be homeless themselves. As first graders explore the world around them and encounter issues like homelessness, it is important for them to have a safe place to ask questions and get answers about the things that they see. If facilitated correctly, this unit provides an outlet for students to do just that, while at the same time providing an opportunity for them to master ELA and mathematics standards.

### **The Benefits of Service Learning**

In this unit – instead of simply memorizing the meaning of the words *concerned*, *support* and *compassion* – students have an opportunity to turn the meaning of these words into actions. During the unit, students show that they are *concerned* by writing letters to homeless children in our community. They show *support* by donating clothes and blankets. They show *compassion* by making cards. But they don't just complete these tasks for fun. Each of these tasks also requires them to apply the reading, writing, communication, and mathematics skills they are learning.

### **A Final Word**

I know that, at first glance, it may be intimidating to bring this type of instruction into your own classroom, especially since it involves discussing a sensitive issue with young children. To assist you in your implementation, I have included some helpful tips throughout the How Can we Support Homeless Children PowerPoint.

I also wanted to share with you the tremendous impact this unit has had on my students. This unit has not only enhanced my students learning, but it has also ignited a passion for giving back, motivated them to openly discuss community issues, encouraged them to read more, communicate often, and empowered them with words. After I implemented this unit in my classroom, my students routinely brought in clothes they had outgrown or food they had leftover in the hopes of donating those items to children in need. It has been inspiring to see this combination of academic and personal growth in my students. And I hope that, if you choose to implement this unit, you will have the opportunity to see the same growth in your own students.

Sincerely,  
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1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher  
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