

## COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING ESSAY #4

Rob Warren ~ SOC 3452

*Very Briefly, to Remind Me: What is your organization, what problems does your organization seek to solve, or what issues does it address? [Note: Here I mostly just stole my answers from Essay #3. You can, too.]*

My organization is a Head Start pre-school program. Children who are ages 3 to 5 go to class for a half day each weekday to learn the basics of letters, numbers, colors, etc. They also get family services—help with nutrition, parenting skills, and other social services. The children at my specific site are almost all children of recent East African immigrants; they seem to be very poor. They all live in the high-rise public housing complex in which the classroom is located.

*Very Briefly, to Remind Me: How does your organization try to solve those problems or address those issues? [Note: Here I mostly just stole my answers from Essay #3. You can, too.]*

The main goal of the Head Start organization is to prepare disadvantaged young people to be ready to do well in kindergarten and beyond. Children are supposed to get basic skills (i.e., learning colors, letters, numbers, and so forth) so they can do as well as more advantaged children in elementary school — at least, that's the idea. The time the kids spend in Head Start is supposed to be focused on things like learning letters and numbers, naming things (expanding vocabulary?), naming colors and shapes, etc. The program also feeds them.

*Very Briefly, to Remind Me: What is your role in the organization? Why are you needed? [Note: Here I mostly just stole my answers from Essay #3. You can, too.]*

I am a classroom volunteer. Mostly I help the teachers with whatever they need—I have been playing with kids, helping them line up, helping them with breakfast, reading some books, helping keep track of kids on field trips. Mostly playing, though. My coloring and Play-Doh skills have improved this semester.

Think about the community that is served by your CEL organization. What have you learned about that community through your CEL work? About the problems it faces, the source of those problems, and how the community is approaching solving those problems?

It may seem odd, but one thing I learned is how entirely similar children and communities are ... even when they are also objectively different in other ways. I am used to upper-middle class white community, and I have certainly raised upper-middle class white children. So, the community and children my CEL organization serves—poor East African immigrants—are night-and-day different. BUT... by and large the community and kids are very similar in important ways. The kids so often remind me of

my kids: emotional, loving, prone to melting down, smart and full of potential, trusting, fun-loving, hopeful. The communities are also concerned, when you get right down to it, with the same things: raising kids to be happy and successful. If you had asked me before the semester, “do East African immigrant parents care about their kids as much as rich white native-born parents” I would have said “of course.” Now, I can prove it.

A second thing I have come to appreciate is just how rigidly and unfailingly segregated this community is from mine (where “mine” is upper-middle class white people). The public housing tower in which my Head Start classroom is located is 200 yards (!) from the youth baseball fields where my kids played and where I coached for years. Never once did I see an East African immigrant kid at those ballfields, and the kids I’ve talked to have no idea those fields are there. 200 yards!!! It’s as though there is a 100-mile tall wall around their building.

*What impact did you have on the community through this work? What did you contribute?*

On The days I volunteered, I worked with about a dozen kids. I would say that most of the days I worked in the classroom, I helped 2 or 3 kids have better days. I made them smile a few times. Maybe some comfort. I gave them something fun to tell their parents about. I sat next to them when they felt lonely or excluded. These are tiny contributions and impacts, in the scheme of things. But to those kids, they may have been day-makers. This class has taught me to value those positive impacts on the world.

*What have you learned about yourself through your CEL work? How have you been challenged personally? How did you grow or change as a person?*

First, I’m pretty good with kids. I knew thins when I raised my own small children, but I forgot.

Second, this experienced challenged me to be OK with discomfort. It was really uncomfortable for me (an introvert) to insert myself into this unfamiliar situation. I did it, and re-learned that there are rewards to putting myself in these situations.

Third, this experienced re-taught me the value of prioritizing my time. I’m super busy. I’m the Director of a huge, multi-million dollar research center. I have multiple large research projects. I’m raising kids. But this experience forced me to find the time to do this valuable work. And it taught me that I need to prioritize these kinds of activities going forward. If I am too me-focused, I devolve into selfishness.

*What values, opinions, or beliefs of yours changed because of your CEL work? Be specific: What ideas, preconceptions, or opinions changed and why?*

This experience eroded my confidence in well-intentioned government programs and policies. I honestly believe that everyone involved in the Head Start program—starting with Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s—means well. But this program is not doing a whole lot to help these kids. They mostly learn—at least in my experience and in this classroom—how to line up, how to respect authority, how to get by. Nothing this program does comes close to overcoming the huge advantages enjoyed by wealthier kids who are enrolled in intellectually richer pre-school programs.

*What do you think are the long-term solutions to the problems and issues your CEL organization addresses through its work? How does the work of your CEL organization fit into the long-term solution, if at all?*

The long-term solution is radical change to both (a) patterns of economic and material inequality and (b) our commitment to high quality early childhood education for absolutely every child. These would eliminate the need for Head Start. Of course, this is not just a policy change ... it's a cultural and political change. Some inequality is inevitable; massive and growing inequalities are not. High quality early childhood education—which is expensive—is nonetheless an incredibly smart social investment. Until the country collectively embraces these ideas, we will continue to need Head Start programs.

My CEL organization does not do anything to address these longer-term solutions.

*How have course materials (e.g., readings, class discussions) changed your understanding or views of your CEL work—that is, of the mission or importance of your organization, of its role in solving problems, or of the issues faced by its clients? Provide specific examples.*

*How has your CEL work changed or informed your understanding of course materials (e.g., readings or lectures)? That is, how has your time in your CEL organization affected the way you interpret or understand class materials? Provide specific examples.*

We spent one class session on early childhood education, but mostly it hasn't come up much. But I am appreciating how cumulative everything is. If you are far behind on Day 1 of kindergarten, you are likely to stay behind (as far as reading, math, vocabulary, etc.). Being behind early sets you up to fall behind later, and to be ill-prepared for high school and college. Yes, there are exceptions—kids who are behind early but then catch up and excel. But generally speaking, my kids are behind and are likely to stay behind.

On top of this, as things now stand the kids I work with are likely to attend relatively poorly-funded schools with fewer opportunities. This can't help. I am also struck by the fact that these kids rarely, if ever, see white kids: Approximately zero white kids live in their building, and they are not likely to attend elementary school with more than a few white kids. Why? Well, partly it's because white parents choose not to live in this neighborhood and (if they do) they send their kids to private (mostly Catholic) schools.

How will these kids be prepared to attend huge public high schools in St Paul? How will they be “college ready” in just a few short years?

On the first question: People often praise me for the volunteer work I do, and most people seem to think that programs like Head Start are noble efforts to correct social inequality. But my reading of the course materials makes me feel (at least this week) that Head Start and similar programs are an ineffectual drop in the bucket. And, more cynically, an effort to *appear* to be addressing problems that are much more fundamental and intractable. The cards are entirely stacked against my kids: They come from poor families who, despite their tremendous desire to help their kids, are not fully able to do so. They are getting lower quality early childhood education than their more advantaged peers. They are forced by a racist and xenophobic society to live in isolation. They will be forced, through racist housing patterns and policies, to live in poor neighborhoods throughout their lives and to attend lower quality schools. They will face discrimination and hostility throughout their lives because of the color of their skin and because of their religion. So, while my CEL work may be virtuous in some respects, it is hardly noble and it is helping these kids only very slightly.

On the second question: My CEL work has put a very real human face on what are sometimes theoretical or abstract issues. In almost every respect, these kids are just like my kids and their friends. Thus, I deeply empathize with them, root for them, want them to have good days and successful futures. This changes how I think about abstract issues like school segregation and achievement gaps and social inequality. It’s hard to study these issues in the abstract when you have images of specific kids in your head.