



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2024.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: County of Henrico
Program Title: Hyper Local Student Led Service Learning
Program Category: Customer Service

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

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Title: Deputy County Manager for Community Affairs
Signature: *M. Callahan*

Program Overview

The Freeman Project is a student-led organization created to better the learning environment at Douglas Freeman High School in Henrico County, Virginia. Members meet every other day during school hours to work on activities requested by school faculty or created by students individually. The students work together as a team on many projects, big and small. Every student enrolled can incorporate their ideas and creativity while brainstorming different projects. Teachers and faculty often request help with tasks within their classrooms. The focus is on integrating meaningful community involvement into the classroom environment. Service learning provides opportunities for students to become leaders in their school and implement their passions into projects to benefit their community.

Problem/Challenge/Situation Faced by Locality

The Freeman Project started in 2015 in response to needs for small community service projects such as trash cleanup and minor teacher requests. However, it quickly grew in support and influence and in no time became a legitimate service-based class known as the "Freeman Project." This student-led organization began solving various concerns within the Douglas Freeman community. As time passed, the Freeman Project still handled day-to-day responsibilities but also took on more elaborate projects.

Description of the Program

Douglas S. Freeman High School is in Henrico County, Virginia's West End area. A group of students participate in "The Freeman Project," which is dedicated to improving the school and community through volunteer service. These students aim to improve the school community in any way possible and plan to leave the school better than they found it. The core values of this

organization are "Inspire. Improve. Connect." The Freeman Project is determined to create an environment where community service is not a requirement but a way of life.

At Douglas S. Freeman High School, a group of 25-30 students meets every other day to work on various projects around the school. Each member will accumulate over 100 hours of community service throughout the school year. The Freeman Project's motto is "Inspire, Improve, Connect," highlighting the program's fundamental values and objectives. The program's mission statement is, "The Freeman Project is a student-run elective that seeks to inspire our fellow Mavericks for the betterment of the Freeman Community."

The Freeman Project allows students to serve their school and community while enabling them to implement their creative perspectives and ideas in the school. In addition to providing students with opportunities, the Freeman Projects helps alleviate burdens on school faculty. For example, students collect and empty the recycling bins of every classroom and office in the school after acknowledging that teachers rarely had the opportunity to do so during the day. Teachers frequently enlist Freeman Project members to help with tasks, such as organizing phone extensions for teachers, sorting through and inventorying closets, art and construction projects and moving furniture. Recognizing teachers' many responsibilities, the Freeman Project is dedicated to relieving them of burdens when possible.

The Freeman Project primarily focuses on improving the physical learning environment of the school, including the repair, renovation and creation of different aspects of the school. Members of the organization frequently participate in groundskeeping activities, including repairing windscreens on our sports fields, maintaining gardens and weeding paths around the school. Students have also helped clean trophy cases and collaborate with other clubs, including the National Honor Society, to pick up trash around the school and local neighborhoods.

The Freeman Project excels at its ability to identify problems or opportunities for improvement and then innovate and execute creative solutions. The project ideas were conceived, planned and

managed entirely by the students. In the past, students created war memorials for former Douglas Freeman students killed while serving in the military. Students updated their woodworking skills to make benches, shelves and bus boards for the school. All the raised flower beds and the Lara Curry Memorial Learning Garden in front of the school were built by students in the Freeman Project. More recently, to provide the library with extra space for donated books, group members removed a section of lockers and transformed the space into a community bookshelf. They restored the American and Virginia flags in front of the high school. In a school, there's always a need for extra help and a way the community can be improved and that's what the Freeman Project is about — lending a hand and bettering our school community.

Responding to Economic Downturn

When the Freeman Project Class decided to pursue the outdoor classroom as a project, the students' feet hit the ground running with fundraising. After raising about \$12,000 by selling school spirit car stickers and T-shirts, the group coordinator applied for and were awarded the Coca-Cola Company Environmental Sustainability Grant.

After gaining confidence, the members were ready to start executing their plan. They decided to reach out to a contractor for a quote; they encountered their first big hurdle — a contractor quoted the group \$45,000 to construct the project, far exceeding what research had led the group to expect. They decided to pursue options beyond fundraising. They pitched the idea in various settings and received several "Sorry, we can't help you" responses. They met with Henrico County's Workforce and Career Development Office, looking for help. Eventually, one listener found the presentation persuasive. As a Douglas Freeman alumnus, Phillip Parker of Parker Consulting was excited about the opportunity to support the group and give back to his high school. Although his organization could not help, through his connections he was able to suggest

other alumni who would supply materials within the budget. The local businesses that donated materials or gave significant discounts were Colonial Construction Materials, which sold pavers at a discount; Stone Center of Richmond, which sold products to the school at a reduced price; Luck Stone, which donated gravel for the base of the outdoor classroom, and Mike Hart of Homescapes LTD, who helped with labor and equipment. Construction began after lots of thoughtful discussions, careful planning and building instruction. The decision for group members to build the classroom embodied the Freeman Project's spirit and showcased members' adaptability and commitment to finding creative solutions. From screeding sand and laying pavers to designing the classroom and arranging funding, this project is the epitome of the Freeman Project.

The Cost of the Program

The Freeman Project is entirely self-funded, relying on donors for supplies and materials. The program has no essential operating costs and has funded every project with its funds. The group primarily provides labor and uses existing supplies when possible. Tools, building materials and art supplies have been either given to the Freeman Project or purchased with donations. Outside partners, such as Parker Consulting, Luck Stone, Colonial Construction, Stone Center of Richmond, Homescapes, Douglas Freeman's PTSA and many families of the Douglas Freeman community aid in supplying the Freeman Project with the materials needed. When possible, the Freeman Project reuses supplies around the school, for example, salvaging wood from unused pallets. Projects completed through partnerships and fundraising efforts are of no cost to the school.

The Results/Success of the Program

The outdoor classroom concept began in the spring of 2022 when schools went back to in-person instruction after the COVID-19 pandemic. Students wanted a space to learn, converse and promote a healthy mental environment for students and faculty. The desire for an outdoor classroom grew exponentially as the school year progressed. Students begged to go outside for class — a goal even teachers shared. The Freeman Project had talked about constructing an outdoor classroom for years. Still, after the pandemic, they decided to devote their efforts to accomplishing a common goal. After the school administration approved the proposal, students flew drones over the site to capture accurate dimensions, contacted surveyors and marked utility lines. Students completed extensive research to produce a detailed plan highlighting design tactics, the benefits of outdoor learning, necessary construction materials and a cost estimate.

Once construction began, it was all hands-on deck. The Freeman Project joined forces with a local contractor and through much planning, the contractor generously donated some materials to the project. Although business partnerships covered some material costs, the Freeman Project had to handle the manual labor for building the classroom. This project allowed the students to put their strengths to the test and build a unified team to complete the learning space. The work consisted of screeding sand, laying pavers, edging the patio, compacting the surface and many other tasks. The outdoor classroom has provided the members of the Freeman Project a chance to discover and learn bits and pieces of construction, giving them practical life skills that they would have never had an opportunity to do in a traditional classroom.

As a result of the outdoor classroom, students will now have the chance to gather and learn in the comfort of the outdoors. The Freeman Project hopes that this project will positively impact Freeman's community by improving mental health and the school's learning environment. The outdoor classroom not only acts as a place where the Douglas Freeman community can gather and learn together, but also serves as a beacon of inspiration for future projects. Future students at Douglas Freeman will use and hear about the project; it will inspire them to take on

similar ideas with their teachers and clubs in the school. Additionally, brainstorming and designing additions to the space around the outdoor classroom has begun. Goals include an amphitheater built into the natural hill behind the area and a cover over the patio to make it usable even when the weather is not ideal.

Worthiness of Award

The Freeman Project deserves a VACo Award because of the immense effort to plan and construct an outdoor classroom at Douglas Freeman High School. Freeman Project members wanted to create a space for students to learn and unwind outside their indoor campus. The Freeman Project took this exciting challenge into its own hands by completing months of planning, researching and fundraising to get the project started. After many obstacles and hours of manual labor, the students have worked as a solid team to complete the outdoor classroom for the Douglas Freeman's community to share and benefit from.

Hyper Local Student Led Service Learning Supplemental Material

Please view our Outdoor Classroom Presentation, shared with businesses and boards for support of the project:





https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1LJEYr_XkN5BBM31msbAenWRRqbRMIP80Q17faJp04Gc/edit?usp=sharing

<https://sites.google.com/henrico.k12.va.us/thefreemanproject>

