I S flag day flagging? And has the coin dropped on using students to raise money this way? A recent street poll by The New Paper of 100 people aged 15 to 49 showed that nearly half (48 per cent) felt that students should not spend long hours selling flags.

There are other more effective, and creative ways to raise money, they said. The survey was prompted by a comment from undergraduate Zhang Yuchuan in The New Paper on 12 Sep. Miss Zhang, who was made to raise money for the Wildlife Conservation Singapore Fund (WCSF), said: "It’s not like we were raising funds for disaster victims where the need is more obvious."

Miss Zhang is not alone. And that is why more schools are moving towards more meaningful community involvement programmes. One teacher, Mr Siva Ganesh, who is teaching in a secondary school, said: "With a flag day, students sometimes just go through the motions. "But when you are doing volunteer work, it must come from the heart," he added.

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His school offers service learning projects, like a charity soccer programme, along with flag days. Having these projects, Mr Ganesh feels, helps the students take ownership over their community work.

Junior college student Edwina Yeo, 18, has seen her share of students "slacking off" when she took part in flag day back in her in secondary school days. And in one example of that, students apparently out on a flag day were seen queuing up for doughnuts.

A photograph of them was sent to STOMP, The Straits Times’ interactive portal, in April. To re-ignite passion for volunteer work, Miss Yeo and her friends had an idea inspired by Australians – giving out hugs for donations. (See report, at right.)

Volunteers on the Free Hugs campaign raised $20,000 over two months giving hugs to people, and selling postcards and T-shirts designed by the beneficiaries, Viva Foundation for Children with Cancer.

Dr Tan See Wee, chairman of Citibank-YMCA Youth for Causes, which backed the Free Hugs project, said: "With two or three groups plying the same street, it can be quite difficult to raise funds if we stick only to the tin method.

"Students with more energy can embark on (such) social entrepreneurial projects."

Miss Poon Young, 19, agreed: "Even if the organisation really does need cash, at least try to go about getting it in a less obtrusive way like busking, for example, instead of trying to get yet another irate passerby to toss you a few coins."

But some felt that student effort is integral to flag days, as they do help to raise a substantial sum of money. Just two weeks ago, a flag day organised by New Hope Community Services raised $21,000. The Singapore Children’s Society raises $100,000 or more each year through flag day.

To stage a flag day, large pools of volunteers are needed, and schools are a natural source, Ms Rhonda Koh said. She is the corporate communications director of the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre.

Ms Koh added: "This is not to say only students should volunteer for flag days, but they constitute a substantial and ready pool of resource for this particular fund-raising method."

Dr Tan said the public is also used to this form of fund-raising, and results from The New Paper’s poll back up his observation. Eighty per cent of respondents are willing to donate when they see someone with a tin can (see chart).

A check with the National Council of Social Services showed that between 75 and 100 volunteer welfare organisations still apply for flag day each year through ballot. Undergraduate Liu Ke Qian, 20, argued: "Charity isn’t about creativity, its about sincerity."

It does not matter how you contribute, as long as you do so sincerely.