



## Service Learning in Schools

*What values do service learning curricula model and seek to promote? What kinds of social and political relations do they ask students to imagine? What kinds of relationships develop between students and those they serve? What kind of society does service learning lead students to work toward?*

Kahne & Westheimer

While there are a variety of definitions for *service learning*, at the core is the idea of incorporating structured, authentic, community hands-on experiences into formal education. This is contrasted with volunteering services in a community that do not have a structured educational connection.

A service learning program is intended to provide meaningful, real world experiences that promote reflection on and acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to the academic objectives of a course and/or major field of study. The emphasis is not only on benefiting the learner but on benefitting the community (e.g., improving services) and ultimately society (e.g., inculcating citizenship values).

For schools with service learning activities, the service-learning programs are generally part of the schools' core curriculum -- included in at least one subject area (e.g., Social Studies, Science, English) in at least one grade in the school. Typically, schools service-learning requirements involve a mandated number of hours outside of the classroom and/or participation in a certain number of courses. A few report requiring special projects, such as a senior capstone or character education project or activities organized by student and community-based groups. A service learning experience may be a requirement for graduation.

\*The material in this document was culled from the literature and drafted by Elisheva Hochberg-Miller as part of her work with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. Key references used are cited in the reference list at the end of the document.

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## **Scope of Service-Learning**

### **Findings from a 2008 survey of K-12 principals sponsored by the Corporation for National and Community Service and conducted by Westat:**

- 68% of principals reported that their students participate in community activities recognized by schools (compared to 64% in 1999); however, the percentage of schools with service-learning declined from 32% in 1999 to 24% in 2008.

*Note:* The diverging trends for community service and service-learning may be due to factors such as the tendency for principals to value service for its benefits in promoting civic behaviors as contrasted to fostering academic engagement, budget constraints, and curriculum and accountability requirements.

- Only 19% reported that their school district had a policy for service-learning and 28% were not aware of whether their district had such a policy.
- While some schools have used special extra-mural funding (e.g., from foundations, corporations, state and federal programs) to support service-learning activities, most schools use their regular school or district operating funds (as well as volunteers). In some instances, the district designates funds specifically for service-learning efforts.
- A minority of schools had institutionalized service-learning, measured in terms of the presence of a service-learning coordinator, the inclusion of service-learning in improvement plans and board-approved curriculum, and financial and technical support for teachers and staff who implement service-learning activities.
- Elementary schools use less service-learning than secondary schools (20% to 35%), in part because elementary school principals believe their students are too young.
- Schools in low-income areas were significantly less likely to have service-learning activities (20% compared to 27%); however, the gap has decreased since 1999 (23% compared to 36%).
- Schools with service-learning activities reported a strong commitment (96% had either maintained or increased the percentage of students participating in service-learning activities).
- 82% of students say that they would enroll in service-learning if offered at their school.

### **Data compiled by the Education Commission of the States indicate:**

- \$39.5 million in federal funding for Learn and Serve America programs in 2011; funding for the program has since been eliminated by the U.S. Congress.
- 82% of students enrolled in service-learning say their feelings about attending high school became more positive as a result of the experience.
- 42 states have mentioned service-learning in state policy.
- 33 states include service-learning in their state academic standards or frameworks.
- 23 states allow or require school districts to award credit toward graduation for service-learning.
- 21 states have adopted policy stating that student engagement is positively affected by participation in service-learning.
- 17 states identify service-learning/community service as an instructional strategy that increases student achievement.
- 24 states identify participation in service-learning/community service as a means of preparing students for the workplace.
- 25% of higher education institutions have adopted service-learning programs.
- 50% of community colleges have adopted service-learning programs.

<http://www.ecs.org/html/IssueSection.asp?issueid=109&s=Quick+Facts>  
<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/10/66/11066.pdf>

## **What are the benefits of service-learning?**

In current discussions of the benefits of service learning programs, the tendency is to list out possible outcomes (see Appendix). However, as policy was being formulated in the 1990s, Joseph Kahne and Joel Westheimer (1996) asked *In the Service of What?*, and from a moral, political, and intellectual perspective, they analyzed service learning by contrasting its goals in terms of charity or systemic change. Pursuing service learning primarily as charity agenda was seen as stressing (a) giving (a moral goal), (b) civic duty and (c) additive experience (an intellectual goal). In contrast, change as an agenda stressed (a) caring (a moral goal), (b) social reconstruction (a political goal), and (c) transformative experience (an intellectual goal).

It should be noted that Kahne & Westheimer recognize that their framing of this is not exhaustive. For example, they recognize the role of service learning in advancing acquisition of vocational skills. Moreover, they emphasize that the domains are intertwined and that “the same activities may be experienced quite differently by different students.”

These are matters that have a long history of political and social debate. The debate was illustrated succinctly in comments by Benjamin Barber (1984):

The thousand points of light through which the lucky serve the needy may help illuminate our humanity, but they cannot warm or nurture our common soul, nor create a sense of common responsibility connected to our liberty, nor provide integral solutions to structural problems. The model is compassion or charity and thus can never be the subject of political duties.

Given all this, the question of *In the Service of What?* underscores that discussion of benefits raises the question: *Benefits for Who?* – the student? specific recipients of a service? those with a particular political and/or social philosophy?

Research in this area has focused mainly on student outcomes and varies in both quality and reported findings. Nevertheless, most analysts conclude that service-learning enhances: (a) civic knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviors, and responsibility, (b) social skills and capital, (c) academic enjoyment, engagement, and achievement, (d) self-esteem and psychological well-being and (e) career-related knowledge, interests, and skills. Participation in a service-learning program is seen as playing a role in reducing certain problem behaviors. (See the Appendix for examples of the type of results hoped for in each of the above categories.)

## **What is necessary to make service-learning effective?**

Putting together and building capacity for a high quality service-learning program requires resources and commitment. Service-learning programs must be tailored to the overlapping mission, needs, motivations, and capabilities of the participating school and community.

As with any intervention, effectiveness depends on how well the program is implemented. It must be noted at this juncture that one study suggests that students may actually be harmed when a service-learning program is implemented poorly. Following are several institutional and student process considerations that have been identified as critical in ensuring that students get the most out of their service learning experiences.

The National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement (NCLCE) at the Education Commission of the States (ECS) states that high-quality service-learning programs require:

- Meaningful service
- Intentional links to curriculum
- Reflection
- Diversity among participants
- Youth and parental engagement and decision-making
- Mutually beneficial partnerships
- Ongoing progress monitoring
- Appropriate duration and intensity to meet community needs and outcomes.

### **Institutional Process Considerations: Policy, Intervention, Infrastructure**

As with any major school-community program, a strong policy commitment, a well-designed intervention framework, and an appropriate operational infrastructure that addresses both system change and daily implementation are critical to success.

*Policy* supporting service-learning has been limited (see above data). This has had a negative impact on institutionalizing capacity building related to the work, assuring its sustainability, and replication to scale. Such institutionalization is essential in ensuring effective pre and in-service personnel preparation, resource development, formative evaluation and ongoing accountability, while limiting damage from budgetary crises, political whims, or personnel changes.

*Intervention framework.* While the basic elements of a service-learning program are described in the literature, the intervention is inadequately framed within the context of school improvement policy and practice. As a result, the trend is to treat the work as one more project, thereby both limiting it as a positive contribution and contributing to several significant systemic negative effects.

*Operational infrastructure.* Embedding service-learning into the existing instructional component at district and school levels requires strong and visionary leadership, visibility and good communication, so that individuals can easily learn about service-learning and understand its purposes and benefits, a climate and incentives that attract people to service-learning and encourage their continuing involvement, and availability of adequate financial resources.

In a national study of the federally funded *Learn and Serve* programs, results indicated that students with multiple service-learning experiences had more significant and lasting gains across a range of measures than students who had only one exposure. And, researchers have found that student outcomes were better for longer lasting service-learning programs.

More generally, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) reports:

Some states are starting to recognize service-learning's potential in helping students meet the goals of the Common Core. For example, in adopting new state standards to align with the Common Core, Kentucky designed its model curriculum framework to identify expanded/extended learning opportunities as a strategy to engage students. The framework recognizes service-learning as a promising direction in achieving these opportunities. In New Jersey, individualized student-learning opportunities such as service-learning activities are based on specific instructional objectives that meet or exceed the Common Core standards at the high-school level. Service-learning experiences that are integrated into a school district's academic curriculum are identified as a method that allows students to learn and develop through activities that meet the needs of a community and help foster civic responsibility.

<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/10/66/11066.pdf>

### **Student Process Considerations: Student Choice and Reflection**

In designing a service learning program, many process decisions arise. Two of the most important are how to involve students in major decision making and formal reflection about their experiences.

*Choice.* High-quality service learning programs are associated with such processes as ensuring students have a significant voice in choosing and planning their service activities. For example, studies report that: students who chose the focus for their service-learning project scored higher on a scale of civic knowledge than those with no choice; engaging students in these processes is related to students' feeling helpful, valued, and needed; in turn, these feelings are associated with students indicating that participation resulted in positive, life-changing experiences.

*Reflection.* Ensuring that students reflect on their service-learning activities (e.g., in oral or written assignments) also is seen as critical to achieving most service-learning goals. The amount, frequency, and duration of formal reflection are associated with major outcomes, and reflection that clearly connects to curriculum and educational standards is seen as particularly important to student academic learning. In general, research suggests that regular reflection is key to enhancing students' pro-social reasoning and cognitive development, their commitment to volunteerism and belief that they can make a difference in the world, and in their making career choices that position them to transform unjust systems in society.

Sara Helms (2013) notes:

*In 1992, Maryland became the first—and only—state to require service activity of all public high school graduates. Proponents of mandates note that since individual volunteer activity is correlated over time, mandates will create lifetime volunteers. Prior studies demonstrate differences in the observed characteristics of volunteers and nonvolunteers which could drive the correlation in service over time. Using restricted-access data from the Monitoring the Future project, I find the mandate increased volunteering among eighth-grade students. However, the mandate likely reduced volunteering among twelfth-grade students. In contrast to creating lifelong volunteers, my results suggest that the mandate changed the timing of volunteering.*

In its 2014 update, the National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement (NCLCE) at the Education Commission of the States (ECS) notes:

*Although only Maryland and the District of Columbia have requirements that compel high school students to complete a specified number of hours in a service-learning or community-service activity to graduate, every state has legislation or state board of education policy on the books that touches on service-learning or community service. [Since 2011], states have been dealing with the loss of federal funding for service-learning programs, and perhaps as a result of the funding loss, there has been little movement on state service-learning legislation or policy.*

### **Concluding Comments**

Service learning has considerable appeal to educators and many sectors of society, yet how promising future policy support is remains unclear. The challenges are many.

Advocates, however, are clear in arguing for service learning as a boon to improving students' civic and career-related knowledge and sense of responsibility, bolstering a wide range of 21st century skills, interests, attitudes, behaviors, and enhancing personal well-being. All this is presented as especially important in a global economy. And for those concerned with matters related to engaging and re-engaging students in school learning and reducing problem behaviors, service learning is offered as a positive strategy for addressing such concerns.

Researchers also are clear that more and better research is needed to determine the impact of service learning programs. For example, from their political and social perspective, Kahne and Westheimer suggest allocations of resources to service learning raise a need to study the ideological perspectives that underlie service learning programs. Specifically they suggest the following questions: "What values do service learning curricula model and seek to promote? What kinds of social and political relations do they ask students to imagine? What kinds of relationships develop between students and those they serve? What kind of society does service learning lead students to work toward?"

Policy makers concerned with the future of public education must decide how service learning fits in to the big picture of school improvement policy and practice. Is it just another side show project or is it fundamental to the mission of schools (e.g., socializing and helping the young develop appropriately, ensuring our country's economic future, preserving our political system)?

There remains a great deal to learn and discuss about the nature and scope of the work and its impact.

## Appendix

### Student Benefits Attributed to Participating in Service-Learning Programs

A range of attributed benefits have been synthesized, including *enhanced*:

**(a) Civic knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviors, and responsibility**

Knowledge about government, more sophisticated understanding of politics and more likely to vote  
Awareness of social problems & issues & community needs  
Sense of civic responsibility, community engagement, & connectedness  
Desire and intention to become active contributors to society  
Concern for others' welfare & commitment to ethic of service  
Acceptance of diversity/individual differences  
Critical thinking about economic and political inequity & less likely to blame the victim  
Belief that they can make a difference  
Understanding of how to design and implement service project

**(b) Social skills and capital**

Opportunities to form otherwise unavailable relationships  
Connections to schools and organizations  
Social networks  
Positive attitudes towards adults and organizations  
Relationships with peers, parents, & teachers  
Social competence, particularly in interacting with adults  
Trust in peers and adults  
Subsequent engagement in leadership roles

**(c) Academic enjoyment, engagement, and achievement**

Enjoyment of & attitudes toward school, teachers, and education  
Motivation to learn  
Mastery of course concepts  
Problem solving skills  
Attendance and time spent on homework  
Student engagement, connectedness to school, & aspirations  
Math and social studies grades & overall GPA  
Scores on social studies, writing, and English/language arts exams & on standardized testing  
Graduation rates

**(d) Self-esteem and psychological well-being**

Perception of self-worth  
Level of hope  
Self-confidence and perseverance  
Feelings of having more to offer society

**(e) Career-related knowledge, interests, and skills**

Knowledge about career options  
Work related competencies & job interview skills  
Desire to pursue postsecondary education  
Knowledge of how to plan activities  
Acquisition of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills  
Likelihood of finding employment  
Career plans with an emphasis on finding one that is personally satisfying and/or beneficial to others

Additional benefits while participating in a service-learning program are a reduction in certain problem behaviors, such as middle school arrests, teen pregnancy rates, referrals for disciplinary reasons, engagement in risky behavior, and drug usage.

Finally, it is noted that teachers use more active teaching strategies, and there are decreased levels of isolation and alienation and an improved school climate. In the community, there is an enhanced positive perception of school and students.

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A Few Recent Videos on The Future of Service-Learning.

From three sessions of a 2012 Conference entitled, *Beyond the Borders: The Future of Service-Learning*.

>*Global Citizenship and the Democratic Practice of Service-Learning*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCiz1Y0lqWA&list=PL29937F0E1677177C&index=1>

>*Educating Globally Competent Citizens Through International Service-Learning*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuvI3yTF8f0&list=PL29937F0E1677177C&index=2>

>*Uniting Online Education with Service-Learning*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXir0prOUbU&index=4&list=PL29937F0E1677177C>