Chapter 6

School/District and Community Impacts Of K–12 Service-Learning

Summary

From 1997 to 2000, in addition to evaluating academic and civic outcomes of service-learning for students, local CalServe partnerships were asked to address at least one other impact area involving one of the following: participating teachers, schools and districts, or the community served. This chapter summarizes the findings regarding outcomes for either schools and districts or for the community reported to SLRDC during the first two years of this cycle (1997–1998 and 1998–1999). Also presented will be information collected by SLRDC staff from in-depth interviews with school and district administrators from seven partnerships during Year 3 (1999–2000).

Those local partnerships that focused on school and district impacts considered the following overarching questions:

- To what degree are district personnel aware of service-learning, and how has this level of awareness changed?
- How has service-learning advanced at the school and in the district?

Partnerships focusing on community impacts were asked to address two overarching questions:

- What impacts has service-learning had on the community?
- To what degree have students provided a "service" to the community?

Only a small number of partnerships explicitly addressed either impact area during Year 1(1997–1998) and Year 2(1998–1999). Those that evaluated school and district impacts frequently concluded that:

- Understanding of service-learning had increased among school and district administrators.
- Strategies had been identified to advance service-learning at the school and district levels.

Interviews conducted by SLRDC staff with administrators and coordinators also pointed to other positive benefits that local administrators and staff believed were attributable to service-learning activities being carried out in their schools—that involvement by parents and community members had increased, that school climate had improved, and that feelings of "community" within the school had grown.

From: Ammon, M. S., Furco, A., Chi, B., & Middaugh, E. (2002, March). Service-learning in California: A profile of the CalServe service-learning partnerships (1997-2000). Service-Learning Research & Development Center, University of California, Berkeley.

Community outcomes reported by partnerships included the following:

- The community was involved in various ways (ranging from simply receiving student volunteers to partnering with teachers to develop curricula and assessments).
- Services performed by students met a legitimate need in the community.
- Service-learning assisted the work of community agency partners, generating positive feelings toward participation in the partnership.
- Service-learning activities positively affected attitudes toward youth in the community.

Although the reported findings are encouraging, these descriptions of outcomes for schools and districts and for communities frequently focused simply on the affirmation of impact and thus contained little critical analysis about conditions related to the facilitation of desired outcomes. Often evidence of impact consisted mainly of opinions of administrators or staff. While such observations may be perceptive and offer clues about impacts, they still need to be validated in other ways. Partnerships need assistance in clarifying and articulating particular types of school and district or community outcomes that fit in with their long-term goals and in working out reasonable ways of substantiating these school/district and community impacts.

Background

Service-learning is reported to be linked to improved school climate and increased sense of community, improved relations between teachers and administrators, and facilitation of school-wide goals or reform efforts (Billig & Conrad, 1997; Weiler, LaGoy, Crane, & Rovner, 1998). Prior research has also suggested that service-learning impacts the community by generating more positive attitudes toward youth, greater capacity to serve the community, and stronger connections among schools, teachers, and communities (Billig, 2000; Billig & Conrad, 1997; Kingsland, Richards, & Coleman, 1995; Kinsley, 1997; Melchior, 1999, and Weiler et al., 1998). Despite these findings, more research is needed to confirm such benefits for schools and districts and for communities.

It was hoped that the CalServe local partnerships might supply additional information and elaboration about relationships of these types in their yearly evaluation reports. Consequently, local evaluation teams were asked not only to address overarching questions having to do with student impacts, but to consider evaluating the outcomes of service-learning for schools and districts *or* outcomes for communities as their second focus (the third alternative being the study of the impact of service-learning on teachers). Report forms (see Appendix 6-A and 6-B) were designed to provide a common structure and guide for reports about the overarching questions related to school/district or community impacts (see Exhibit 6-1), but partnerships were also given the option of using other reporting formats.

Exhibit 6.1
Overarching Questions for School/District and Community Impact Areas

Impacts on Schools and Districts
- To what degree are district personnel aware of service-learning, and how has this level of awareness changed?
- How has service-learning advanced at the schools and in the district?

Impacts on the Community
- What impacts has service-learning had on the community?
- To what degree have students provided a "service" to the community?

Data Reported by Partnerships

Exhibit 6.2 displays the number of CalServe partnerships that chose to study and report on school and district outcomes *or* community outcomes in their Year 1 (1997–1998) and Year 2 (1998–1999) evaluations. As column 3 in this exhibit indicates, less than one quarter of the partnerships submitting reports (seven in Year 1 and six in Year 2) used the report forms or separate sections in their evaluation reports to address

questions about increased awareness of service-learning by schools and district(s) or progress toward sustainability. Similarly, explicit description and discussion of evidence regarding the relative need of communities for the services provided by students or the nature of changed relationships between the schools and the surrounding communities were relatively infrequent, occurring only in six reports in Year 1 and seven reports in Year 2 (column 6). These low frequencies mean that most partnerships chose to study the impact of service-learning on teachers, rather than the impact of service-learning on schools and districts or on communities. Some additional partnerships each year indirectly or very generally mentioned school/district or community impacts in the context of other parts of their reports (see columns 4 & 7 in Exhibit 6.2).

Exhibit 6.2
Number of Partnerships Examining S-L Impacts on Schools/Districts or on the Community (1997–1999)

Project Year	Total Number Eval.Reports	School and District Impacts			Community Impacts		
		Explicitly Described	Indirectly Described	**Total**	Explicitly Described	Indirectly Described	**Total**
Year 1 '97/98	30 (out of 34)	7	5	**12**	6	3	**9**
Year 2 '98/99	24 (out of 34)	6	5	**11**	7	7	**14**

There may be several explanations for the lower level of attention paid to the evaluation of districts' increased understanding of and support for service-learning and of the usefulness of service-learning activities to the community. In the initial years of a partnership, it is possible that partnership staff are relatively more

concerned with recruiting and maintaining teacher participation and thus with assessing teacher outcomes. Also, partnerships may be less conscious, initially, of the relationship between school, district, or community outcomes and program sustainability and institutionalization. That is, concerns about the partnership's sustainability and institutionalization may be more in the background in the beginning years of a partnership. Another explanation for the dominant focus on teachers in the local evaluation reports is that teachers may have simply been more accessible, making the assessment of this class of outcomes relatively easier to accomplish. More information is needed about the factors affecting these evaluation decisions—that is, whether they are determined by interest and salience, decisions about importance, or ease of evaluation.

Methods and Procedures

Even when partnerships chose to focus explicitly on one of these two areas for their evaluations, often the level of detail provided about the nature of data collected and their analysis was rather limited (sometimes consisting only of a few sentences in the evaluation report). Usually, focus groups or interviews were used to collect information about district/school or community outcomes, and data were collected in the context of regularly scheduled meetings with administrators or community advisory groups. In only two cases were individual interviews scheduled with administrators for the purpose of gathering school/district outcome data. Only one partnership assessed whether administrators' knowledge of service-learning increased during the first year of the partnership (1997-1998) by conducting interviews in Fall 1997 and sending out a follow-up survey in Spring 1998.

Findings and Themes: School and District Impacts

When local partnerships chose to study the impact of service-learning on schools and districts, they focused primarily on (1) school or district administrators' awareness or understanding about service-learning, and/or (2) the degree to which service-learning implementation in the schools and district(s) had increased.

Growth of awareness of service-learning among administrators. Five partnerships over the two years examined how well their school or district administrators understood the essential elements of service-learning. In only one case were administrators found to be fairly limited in their understanding of service-learning. In the first year of this partnership, nine of 12 administrators were not aware that service-learning should be tied to curricular learning, and more than half were unable to distinguish it from community service. While the other four partnerships reported fairly positive findings regarding administrators' knowledge about service-learning, they also voiced concern about some information shared in these conversations. For example, one partnership reported that while most district administrators understood and valued the benefits of service-learning for students and for schools, many of them also felt that service-learning had a relatively low priority within the district, especially compared with efforts to meet literacy or other curriculum standards. Even though these administrators had defined service-learning as involving the integration of service with the curriculum being taught, they still seemed to perceive it as a separate program.

Another partnership described the awareness and use of service-learning in its district as "growing slowly…sometimes at a frustrating pace" because of a lack of

awareness of the differences between service-learning and community service and because of the "unprecedented level of reform" in the district with "administrative, teacher, and policy changes happening daily." Overall, however, these partnerships appeared to feel that their efforts to communicate the nature of service-learning through reports at board and staff meetings, newsletters and updates, and one-on-one interviews had successfully increased school and district level administrators' awareness of this approach to teaching and learning.

District-wide implementation of service-learning. Two partnerships in Year 1 and four partnerships in Year 2 evaluated the extent to which they had been successful in their plans to expand the implementation of service-learning within their schools and districts during the course of the year, examining which of their goals and activities had or had not been accomplished. Two evaluation reports furnished examples of the successes and challenges faced by these partnerships in promoting service-learning district-wide.

Several other partnerships that did not formally evaluate school and district impacts cited evidence to indicate their district's support of service-learning. The types of information included the following:

- A district policy was developed to support service-learning.
- Service-learning has been connected to a part of the official district vision statement or included in the district's strategic plan.
- Service-learning has been connected to the high school's goals for student development.
- The superintendent has served as chair of a service-learning task force
- The district furnished funds for substitutes on staff development days focused on service-learning
- A site advocacy council has been organized to provide guidance, support, training, fundraising information, and materials to school site advocates for service-learning

One partnership represented its implementation efforts and recommendations for the following year in a chart (more generally summarized in Exhibit 6.3).

Exhibit 6.3
Summary of One Partnership's Efforts and Future Plans to Promote Service-Learning

Successes	Challenges	Recommendations
•Listing of specific service projects and events that took place during the year •Development of District policy on service-learning •Increased involvement of school/community partners •Participation with higher education institution (i.e., related to teacher preparation) •Endorsement of service-learning by local community-based organizations •Regional activities listed that served to promote service-learning •Specification of number of teachers trained in service-learning methodology	•Limits on time of the S-L Coordinator to make connections with the community •Limits on the time of teachers to develop meaningful curriculum tied to content areas •School and district preoccupation with assessment (testing) •Competition of service-learning with other staff development efforts •Difficulties in obtaining media recognition for service-learning activities	•Expand into a new curriculum area (such as social science) •Create site advocates at each school site to assist teachers in obtaining resources and coordinating their activities •Compile and catalog information about service-learning at local university to enlist greater interest in S-L •Continue and build on partnership with teacher training programs •Continue to inform superintendent and site administrators about how S-L fits into current vision and reform efforts •Enlist more community input in the advisory board to promote S-L in the larger community

A succinct summary such as that contained in Exhibit 6.3 might be a useful tool in helping a partnership with its long-term planning and in assisting its communications with stakeholders. The CDE might suggest that partnerships formulate such a chart for their year-end reports. It also might be useful to provide examples of such charts to partnerships to help stimulate conversations about program improvement. Such a collection, perhaps organized by partnership

longevity (i.e., charts from new partnerships, charts from partnerships of two or three years duration, charts from well-established partnerships) might serve as a point of departure for discussions and sharing among groups of similar partnerships about strategies for meeting common implementation challenges.

Some interesting insights regarding barriers to district-wide implementation were obtained from the in-depth conversations held with administrators during the 1999–2000 intensive study of seven partnerships. One administrator cited the "*a* through *f* requirements" of the University of California system, high stakes testing, and undue emphasis on curriculum standards as forces that restrict the content and methods used in teaching and limit access of all students to courses where service-learning is being utilized. For example, lower achieving students who are not college-bound would be more likely to take classes that include service-learning projects because those classes are not bound by the "*a* through *f*" requirements of the University of California system. Other administrators also predicted that the current emphasis on curriculum standards and standardized tests would constrain service-learning implementation. However, one administrator voiced the opinion that service-learning's emphasis on coordination with the curriculum might lead to more widespread usage because it would be seen as strengthening student academic learning.

On the topic of ways to work toward district-wide implementation, one school administrator suggested that district mandates to support and expand service-learning can be counterproductive. He maintained that one of his initial challenges in implementing service-learning at his school was that "it was perceived as a top-

down mandate" from the district. This perception resulted initially in "a lot of resistance." In contrast, several administrators noted that the personality and enthusiasm of the service-learning coordinator and personal individual contacts were very important to achieving buy-in and support of all the people involved, most especially that of teachers new to service-learning.

School climate, collaboration, and school-community relations. The targeted school/district outcomes that focused on increasing awareness and expanding implementation of service-learning were, no doubt, influenced by the evaluation's overarching questions. However, widespread effective implementation of service-learning in a partnership's schools and district(s) should be considered only an intermediate goal—a means of attaining other school-wide and district-wide outcomes, such as improved school climate or closer relationships among educators and students. Most of the partnerships assessing school and district impacts did not discuss such outcomes. However, one partnership reported that its administrators thought that the service-learning program had helped the school achieve one of its major goals of helping students earn credits and make progress toward graduation. The interviews conducted in 1999–2000 by SLRDC with administrators in seven partnerships provided other examples of substantive school and district impacts attributed to service-learning. For example, one middle school administrator in an urban district talked about how service-learning helped to create a "community feeling" in the school "to get the kids to feel like they want to be at school and then work from there to get them to improve their academics." An elementary school administrator in a suburban district emphasized how service-learning was a way to

bring in parents and the community to help with the school garden and with buddy reading. That administrator credited these connections fostered by service-learning in helping the school earn a "California Distinguished school" award.

Another elementary school administrator found service-learning to be an important strategy that helped address the school's need to improve the writing, reading, and language skills of its students, thereby improving the school's reputation in the larger community. He asserted that service-learning "is going to help kids learn (and) it's going to help our school not be identified as a low-performing school." This same principal also credited the district's service-learning program with connecting the administrators of the elementary, middle, and high schools. He stated that "none of us knew what other schools were doing in the past" but because students of different grade levels were working together through service-learning, the "grant just accelerated the process of trying to communicate with each other." This outcome not only helped to address the district's concerns about literacy development but also promoted an environment of collaboration, as "everyone is part of the community and we can all work together" to address common concerns. Such substantive and long-term school and district-wide outcomes need to be more clearly targeted in future evaluations of this impact area.

Findings and Themes: Community Impacts

In describing community impacts reported by partnerships in their evaluation reports, it is important to note that "community" was variously defined when it came to designing service activities. For example, some partnerships

designated public agencies as the community with whom teachers partnered for service learning activities. In a good many other instances, "community" was defined primarily in terms of the larger educational system. For example, one partnership talked about the high school students "providing service to most of the elementary schools in the district as well as their own school."

Though these different conceptions of community are all legitimate, it is important in the evaluation of community impacts to clearly articulate the community or communities being served and who speaks for or best represents that community. One partnership perceptively pointed out that there may be differences between the needs identified by community residents and those identified by community agencies. An agency may cite the cleanup of a neighborhood as having a substantial community impact, but residents may have other views about which needs of their community are most compelling.

Another problem that occurred in the evaluation of community impacts during Year One (1997–1998) was that some partnerships focused not on the impact of the service activities on the community but instead on community partners' perceptions or opinions of impacts on *students*. For example, some asked community agency staff questions such as "What have students learned through these experiences?" rather than "How has your agency or its clients benefited from the students' service?"

In general, partnerships reported finding positive outcomes of service-learning for the community. Five types of questions were commonly examined by partnerships evaluating community impacts:

1. How was the community involved in service-learning activities?
2. Did the service meet a real need?
3. How has service-learning affected the participating community agencies?
4. Do agencies and community members want to continue service-learning?
5. How has service-learning affected the community's attitudes toward youth?

The following paragraphs summarize the findings reported by partnerships that studied community impacts.

Role of community partners. In two partnerships, surveys given to community partners at the end of every activity indicated that the most common roles for community personnel were providing supplies and information to the teachers and students involved in the activities and managing on-site supervision and instruction of students. In 1997–1998 several partnerships described various possible roles that community agencies might play in service-learning activities, drawing on the different ways that collaborations had been created and structured during that year. These accounts detailed different modes and degrees of participation by both official and unofficial community partners, ranging from individuals and organizations who simply received student volunteers to active leaders who developed curricula and partnered with teachers in carrying out most of the planned activities. A picture of such a continuum of possibilities for involvement by community partners might be a useful tool that partnerships could use to start a conversation between community partners and teachers about various ways they might arrange to work together.

Meeting of community needs. While at least three partnerships reported addressing the extent to which community needs were met, varying amounts of detail were provided regarding how this question was evaluated. In one

partnership report that examined this dimension of impact, no findings were discussed and only very general statements were made (e.g. "students have made an impact"). Similarly, another partnership reported that "recipients appreciated the work of students and admire and respect them for serving." A third partnership, however, used surveys to collect feedback from community partners. Community agencies were asked to report on the degree to which they thought students provided needed services. This partnership reported that, when asked whether services provided by the students met community needs, 63% of the community leaders replied "Very much." The remaining 37% reported that the service "somewhat" met community needs. Since these community partners were not asked to elaborate their answers, it is unclear whether the somewhat qualified endorsements indicated reservations about the *type* of service provided or the *quality* of service provided. In the future, local evaluators should be encouraged to collect such clarifying information that would help teachers improve their partnerships with community organizations.

A number of teachers interviewed during the 1999–2000 intensive study brought up the tension that they felt existed between selecting service activities that met an important authentic need in the community and those that best fit with their curricular objectives and the capabilities of their students. In the quote that follows, a teacher fluctuates between emphasizing service and academic goals in describing how she developed her buddy gardening service-learning activities:

> The thing I had at the back of my mind was I wanted to teach stewardship. . .so the kids are learning just to respect the dirt and treat it with only organic products and recycle and take care of the storm drain that's near the garden and not to waste the water. . .plus they're learning to care for younger kids. .

> .But I think the critical thing for me is the learning, the education part. And from there, we can come up with a project. And sometimes I wait to see how the project is going before I sort of formulate what the service part is going to be.

An additional problem for teachers that affected the selection of the service activities centered around logistical difficulties in working with community organizations located some distance away from their school. Geographical distance created not only transportation challenges but also affected teachers' ability to meet frequently with agency staff to plan and adjust service activities to optimize their usefulness to the community. Such dilemmas and conflicts among teachers' priorities indicate areas that would be useful to focus on in professional development for teachers. Sessions in which teachers share ideas and strategies with one another about ways to solve such implementation challenges should be included as part of this inservice effort.

Effects on the work of community agencies. Two partnerships examined ways service-learning projects affected the work of the partnering community agencies. In one, community sponsors reported that service-learning activities brought various agencies together, raised public awareness and feedback regarding issues they were trying to address in the community, and assisted them in accomplishing their principal tasks (e.g., cleaning up environmental habitats). In the other report, students' work was reported as having increased the capacity of community sponsors to meet the expectations of clients and member agencies.

Evaluation of the effects of students' service on the work of community agencies tended to focus on the presence or absence of positive reports, rather than on information that might have led to program improvement (such as ways of

defining student roles or providing training that might lead to significant service contributions). For example, one partnership reported that 65% of its community sponsors agreed that service-learning positively affected their work. However, no information was provided about why the other 35% of the community sponsors thought students' service did not positively affect their work.

Attitudes toward continuing service learning. Several partnerships surveyed community members about maintaining service-learning activities. For example, one partnership surveyed parents (as members of the "community") to determine attitudes toward continuing service activities. In both years, an impressive 90% of parents felt that service-learning should continue. Staff of the partnership felt the survey was useful not only in documenting the overwhelming positive nature of community reactions but in prompting parents to become community advocates for service-learning. This partnership observed that "parents are an integral part of networks in the community (e.g., belong to organizations, own businesses) and will spread the word about positive effects of service-learning if their child has had a good experience."

It should be noted that only those community members that were already involved were surveyed. No partnerships reported asking individuals or agencies that were *not* involved in service-learning to examine their reasons for not partnering. Such information might provide useful insights into ways to more successfully engage additional community participation.

Community attitudes toward youth. Several partnerships reported an increase in positive attitudes toward youth within the broader community as a

result of service-learning. For example, in interviews with agencies regarding the benefits of service-learning, one urban partnership found that staff members felt there was now a more positive impression of youth because students were visible in helping the community.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite the small number of partnerships focusing on the evaluation of school/district or community impacts, there were clear indications that CalServe partnerships were achieving some measure of success in raising awareness and appreciation of service-learning in their districts and in their larger communities. However, a number of issues and questions were raised by this review of local partnerships' efforts to evaluate school/district and community impacts during the years 1997–2000.

District and Schools Impacts. It seems important that, if partnerships choose to evaluate school and district impacts in the future, they should go beyond simply seeking confirmation of acceptance or positive affect by administrators. It should be pointed out, however, that the two overarching questions posed for partnerships regarding school and district impacts in this grant cycle focused on *awareness* of the concept of service-learning by district personnel and on the *level of implementation* of this teaching methodology, *not* on substantive impacts that the implementation of service-learning was having on schools and their staff. Interviews carried out by SLRDC staff during the 1999–2000 study revealed that administrators in seven partnerships believed service-learning to have had substantive impacts in their

districts, contributing to more positive attitudes of students toward school and to higher parent participation in school-related activities. One recommendation for the future would be to help partnerships be more specific about the types of school and district impacts they would like to document. Such outcomes could then be investigated in ways that would go beyond soliciting administrators' impressions or opinions in interviews (for example, conducting attitude surveys with students or documenting parent volunteer hours).

Community Impacts. To improve local evaluation efforts in the community impact area, partnerships need more input and examples about what is meant by "impacts on the community." Issues such as how "community" is defined and who speaks for any community are important ones for participating teachers to discuss when they evaluate whether real community needs have been met. However, it is also obvious that teachers need to weigh a number of considerations—educational, logistical, and practical—when they make decisions about particular service activities for K–12 service-learning. Teachers quite naturally may feel it important that goals relating to students' long-term academic and civic development be given prime consideration. Moreover, it may not be necessary that the most critical community need be addressed through service-learning, but only that students perform a service that both the recipient and the student feel is authentic. The overwhelmingly positive community approval of service-learning reported by local partnerships may indicate that, for most community members, the most important feature of these programs is that students are demonstrating their willingness to address community problems. Still, given the importance for service-learning of

meeting authentic community needs, it may be useful for teachers to reflect on and discuss competing priorities in their planning and evaluation sessions. Although it is significant and reassuring to obtain confirmation of positive reactions to students' service by community members and organizations, it may be useful for future evaluation efforts to solicit clarification of ratings, constructive criticism of activities, and suggestions for ways to improve partnerships with the community through individual interviews and focus groups.

References

Billig, S. H. (2000). Research on K–12 school-based service-learning: The evidence builds. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *81*(9), 658-664.

Billig, S. & Conrad, J. (1997). *An Evaluation of the New Hampshire Service-Learning and Educational Reform Project*. Denver, CO: RMC Research.

Kingsland, S. F., Richards, M. & Coleman, L. (1995). *A Status Report for KIDSNET, Year One, 1994–1995.* Portland, ME: University of Southern Maine.

Kinsley, C. (Oct. 1997). Service-Learning: A Process to Connect Learning and Living. In Service-Learning: Leaving Footprints on the Planet. *National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin*, 1-7.

Melchior, A. (1999). *Summary Report: National Evaluation of Learn and Serve America.* Waltham, MA: Center for Human Resources, Brandeis University.

Weiler, D., LaGoy, A., Crane, E. & Rovner, A. (1998). *An evaluation of K–12 service-learning in California: Phase II Final Report.* Emeryville, CA: RPP International with the Search Institute.