

Service-Learning with Disadvantaged Youth

Source: Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, Search Institute, December 2007

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Service-Learning with Disadvantaged Youth

On average, it's harder to grow up well when you live in poverty. Indeed, low socioeconomic status (SES) is negatively linked to a wide range of indicators of child and adolescent well-being. At the same time, growing up poor does not seal one's destiny. Service-learning can be an important strategy for building strengths and resources into young people's lives.

Benefits of Service-Learning for Disadvantaged Youth

Young people from disadvantaged circumstances benefit from participation in quality service-learning in a number of different ways, including the following:

- They tend to have a greater commitment to learning and better school attendance, grades, and academic success than low-income students who did not participate.
- They tend to be more likely to believe they are contributing to the community, to be engaged in learning, and other positive outcomes.
- They tend to demonstrate more positive civic attitudes and behaviors than youth from their peers who do not volunteer.

The Opportunity Gap

Despite the value of service-learning for disadvantaged youth, they are less likely to have opportunities to serve others.

- Only 43% of youth from disadvantaged circumstances volunteer, compared to 59% for other youth.
- Schools and community-based organizations serving youth in disadvantaged circumstances are less likely to provide service-learning opportunities.
- Youth from low-income circumstances are less likely to be asked to serve.

Engaging Disadvantaged Youth in Service-Learning

Here are some starting points for reflection and action about how to reach and include young people from disadvantaged circumstances:

Examine assumptions and stereotypes—Young people from disadvantaged circumstances are more often seen as liabilities, not resources. Strength-based understandings of youth development offer resources and strategies aimed at viewing all young people as resources, regardless of their socioeconomic background, resources, race/ethnicity, or other differences.

Diversify leadership—Service-learning is perceived to have well-educated, middle-class, and white leadership. Finding ways to broaden leadership will offer young people more role models to motivate and guide them into a lifetime of service.

Be intentional about diversity issues—Service-learning programs will more effectively engage diverse youth by reflecting on and sharing cultural values, emphasizing each young person's capacity to serve, helping young people work toward a common goal,



helping to enlarge young people's perspectives, and promoting humane values.

Use effective service-learning practices—Because of past experiences and the potential for mistrust, it can be helpful to emphasize key elements of effective service-learning:

- Create a group environment in which young people feel safe and well-connected, and like they belong.
- Invite them to identify the issues and concerns that they want to address.
- Set clear boundaries and expectations for behavior.
- Challenge them to use their gifts, talents, and energy to do benefit others.
- Increase their responsibilities as they have early successes.
- Invite responsible adults to serve as mentors, role models, and guides.

Be intentional about diversity issues—Service-learning programs will more effectively engage diverse youth by reflecting on and sharing cultural values, emphasizing each young person's capacity to serve, helping young people work toward a common goal, helping to enlarge young people's perspectives, and promoting humane values.

Engage trusted institutions and networks—Youth from disadvantaged circumstances likely trust and are engaged in some institutions more than others. The only institutions where disadvantaged youth are *more likely* than other youth to provide service, for example, are faith-based organizations. Thus, these institutions may be particularly important allies in ensuring that disadvantaged youth have quality opportunities for service-learning.

Embed service-learning into the core curriculum or program, rather than as optional activities. Simply providing more optional activities does not necessarily increase equity by reaching those who are currently not participating. Integrating service-learning into core curriculum is more likely to engage those young people who are least likely to connect otherwise.

Increase funding for service-learning for youth in disadvantaged circumstances. High-quality service-learning often requires extra resources, so better-funded programs and districts can afford to provide more and better opportunities.

Integrate young people together. One of the dangers in highlighting youth from disadvantaged circumstances as a focus for service-learning is that it could inadvertently fuel additional programs that label and further isolate these young people in their communities. Service-learning projects can be opportunities for all young people to participate on equal footing and build relationships across differences.

For a more detailed discussion, including references and documentation, see the complete online fact sheet at

http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/cb_facts/disadvantaged_youth/expanded.php

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