



Why Districts, Schools, and Classrooms Should Practice Service-Learning

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For additional resources on this and other service-learning topics visit Learn and Serve America's National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at <http://www.servicelearning.org>.

Service-learning should be practiced in schools because it yields so many simultaneous benefits. As a "value-added" approach it helps multiple participants from schools and communities and has multiple benefits for each. This fact sheet highlights some key reasons why districts, schools and classrooms should practice service-learning.



Service-learning leads to engagement and incorporates research on effective instruction Research shows that students who participate in high quality service-learning experiences typically become more engaged in learning as shown by increased attendance and motivation to learn. This is because service-learning incorporates much of what is known about effective instruction. Service-learning is an interesting and meaningful activity that relevant to students' lives and involves cognitive, social, and affective components of learning. It provides an opportunity for every student to be successful and it helps students learn how to transfer the knowledge and skills they acquire into real life settings.

Service-learning helps academic improvement and higher order thinking skills Research shows that when service-learning is designed in particular ways, students show gains on measures of academic achievement, including standardized tests. The academic benefits of service-learning come when teachers explicitly tie service activities to standards and learning objectives, and when they design instruction that maximizes learning. Service-learning that includes environmental activities often yields student gains in the content areas of math (e.g., measurement and problem solving) and science (e.g. prediction and knowledge of botany) if these knowledge and skill areas are explicitly woven into the experience. In addition to acquisition of core knowledge and skills, some researchers found that many service-learning tasks help students to improve higher order thinking skills such as analysis, problem solving, decision-making, cognitive complexity, and inferential comprehension because they are exposed to relevant tasks that require them to use these types of skills. This benefit can be realized if teachers play an active role in facilitating dialogue and understanding of more complex tasks.

Service-learning fosters the development of important personal and social skills Studies show that service-learning has strong effects on several areas related to character, reduction of risk behaviors, and promoting an ethic of service. Service-learning, for example, has been shown to promote responsibility, trustworthiness, and caring for others - all of which are positive character traits. Character development occurs because students are often given responsibility for outcomes in service-learning settings and are more likely to engage in interdependent tasks and joint productive activity. They learn not to let each other down or to disappoint those being served. They also often develop bonds with adults other than parents and teachers, providing them with another source of guidance that they occasionally use for advice. Many studies show that young people who engage in service-learning are less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as smoking, unprotected sexual relationships, and drug use.

Service-learning helps develop stronger ties to schools, communities, and society

Most service-learning activities help bond students to school because they become more motivated to learn. Service-learning can also establish a sense of civic responsibility to the school, community, and society. For example, students who help neighbors participate in the census learn why it is important that every citizen be counted. Students who help with voter registration learn about how democracy works. Young people who engage in service-learning often come to believe that they can make a difference in their schools, communities, and society. For many young people, service-learning provides one of the few venues where they can participate and be successful on a regular basis. This experience can be empowering in a very positive way, showing that pro-social contributions are the best pathway to success.

Service-learning promotes exploration of various career pathways

Through their service-learning experiences, many students come into contact with adults in careers that would otherwise remain hidden to them. For example, students may meet social workers, architects, a variety of service workers, scientists, park rangers, government workers, and others who work in community agencies during their service experience. This is the first time many young people are exposed to individuals in these types of careers.

Service-learning is associated with positive school environments

Service-learning is currently practiced in about a third of all public K-12 schools in the United States. Studies of schools in which service-learning is practiced school-wide show that service-learning at many sites has served to reinvigorate teachers, stimulate dialogue on teaching and learning, and develop more caring school climates. Many teachers who practice service-learning are often passionate in their support of its practice. These teachers feel that service-learning has changed the way they teach and made learning more fun and productive. Research shows that while initially teachers felt that service-learning was more work for them, over time they believed that the extra work declined significantly and that the benefits outweighed the costs.

Service-learning is associated with more community support for schools

Communities derive many benefits from service-learning. The service activities in which the students engage often are designed to address a specific community problem or meet a particular need, and often serve to build the capacity of the community organization. Community members who interact with the young people frequently say that they change their perceptions of youth, seeing them as assets and resources that contribute to the community in positive ways.

Most of the benefits of service-learning described here do not come about without explicit attention to service-learning design and implementation. In particular, the quality of the reflection activities and their connection with explicit learning goals tied to standards, the skills of the teachers in facilitating understanding, and the degree to which students are given choices in planning, implementing, and assessing their learning are most highly associated with beneficial outcomes.

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

http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/k-12_facts/why/expanded.php

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