

# WHAT IS SERVICE-LEARNING?

## A Guide for Parents

### What Is Service -Learning?

*A Guide for Parents* provides information about your role in participating in and promoting this effective way of teaching. Service-learning takes place in schools and youth groups across America. Your involvement can make a difference!

Simply put, service-learning connects classroom studies with the natural caring and concern young people have for their world. Service-learning allows young people to contribute to solving problems by helping others in their school community, their neighborhood, or around the world. When students apply what they are learning in ways that help others, the results are memorable. Students gain lessons that last a lifetime. While learning, they develop the ability to contribute to a better society and we all benefit.

### What does service-learning look like?

*Here are a few examples.*



#### Elementary children in Florida

studied the consequences of natural disasters through books and newspaper articles and by interviewing city officials. They determined that families need a place to gather their important papers in case of evacuation. So the children designed a large envelope with a checklist for this purpose. They added tips about rescuing pets and other advice to make a difficult situation easier. Students distributed the envelopes to families through school and community organizations.

**Middle school students in Pennsylvania** learned about the health consequences of poor nutrition and lack of exercise. They wanted to do something to change those habits for themselves and their families. So students conducted health fairs to educate their neighbors and worked with their English teachers and families to create a cookbook with healthy versions of family recipes. Then, because it was difficult to find fresh produce, students worked with their math, social studies, and shop teachers to open a fruit and vegetable stand for the school and community.



**High school students in Oklahoma** investigated how a local creek became polluted. In social studies, they researched the history of mining that led to the problem. They learned which government agencies help clean toxic waterways. Science students tested water. In English classes, students

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## What does service-learning look like?

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interviewed residents. Now, students have authored two books of research, memoirs, and poetry about Tar Creek. These activities helped make officials aware of the pollution and now the creek is being cleaned and restored. Every year, students sponsor a conference to involve and teach others.



With service-learning, students apply knowledge, skills, and talents as they show leadership and contribute to their communities in many ways. Every student can succeed. Classroom participation

increases as students recognize that learning is relevant and that they have a role to play in their communities.



## How is service-learning different from community service or volunteer work?

Service-learning differs from community service or volunteer work because the education of students and young people is always at its core. Students are actively participating in the process of understanding, integrating, and applying knowledge from various subjects as they work to improve their communities. The question "Why am I learning this?" disappears as they see what they have learned in action.

*For more information, contact the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at [www.servicelearning.gov](http://www.servicelearning.gov).*

**Service-learning can be defined** as a teaching method that includes service to others. With service-learning, students:

- connect academic subjects;
- meet real community needs;
- become leaders who contribute ideas, make decisions, and solve problems;
- discover benefits for everyone involved;
- get to work with community partners;
- develop as active members of society.

## 5 core components of service-learning

**Investigation:** Young people begin their research on the community problems of interest.

**Planning:** Young people, often working with community partners, plan the ways in which they will meet the community need.

**Action:** All participants implement their plans by engaging in the activities that will meet the community needs. This is the actual service portion of service-learning.

**Reflection:** At each stage, participants engage in some form of activity that allows them to think about the community need, their actions, their impacts, what worked and did not work, and/or similar types of analytic thinking.

**Demonstration/Celebration:** These activities go hand in hand as young people show others, preferably in a public setting with those that have influence, what they have accomplished, what they have learned, and the impact of their work. Celebration of the learning and impact follows the demonstration.

Shelley Billig, RMC Research, 2008.

## How do students benefit from service-learning?

Studies show that service-learning can develop students' knowledge and abilities in many ways.

**Through service-learning programs and experiences, students may:**

- increase motivation and desire to learn;
- develop responsibility, make decisions, and solve problems;
- improve in many academic areas;
- have a better sense of self;
- develop the ability to work well with others;
- experience positive relationships with peers and community members;
- replace stereotypes with respect for others;
- be exposed to career options;
- be better prepared for college and the workplace;
- learn about community resources for themselves and their families;
- make a positive contribution to their community; and
- begin to develop a lifelong commitment to public service and to learning.



As educator  
John Dewey said,  
*"Education is not  
preparation for life.  
It is life itself."*

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**Research** shows that service-learning positively affects youth in three general areas: academic engagement and achievement, civic attitudes and behaviors, and social and personal skills.

### **For example:**

A Philadelphia study found that 6th grade students participating in service-learning programs had *higher scores* than non-participants in tests for language arts and science (Billig, 2004).

Civic engagement activities *raised the odds of graduation and improved high school students' progress* in reading, math, science, and history (Dávila & Mora, 2007).

Students in service-learning had a *stronger set of job and career related skills and aspirations* than students who did not participate (Yamauchi et.al., 2006).

Students *classified as "at risk" made significant progress* in reading and writing, and in school adjustment and general resiliency. Attendance and participation rates increased, as did grade point averages and positive attitude toward themselves and school (Kraft & Wheeler, 2003).

Read more in the issue brief *The Impact of Service-Learning: A Review of Current Research* ([www.learnandserve.gov/pdf/07\\_0224\\_issuebrief\\_servicelearning.pdf](http://www.learnandserve.gov/pdf/07_0224_issuebrief_servicelearning.pdf)).

## Is there a role for parents with service-learning?

*Absolutely! Parents play a key role in the success of service-learning in a variety of ways.*

### Parent involvement in schools

Parents bring valuable resources, information, and ideas to service-learning. Consider these ways parents have been partners:

- Parents inform administrators and teachers about service-learning and available state and national resources.
- Parents educate other parents about service-learning so they can assist teachers in and out of the classroom.
- Parents attend service-learning conferences to stay informed and involved.
- Parents promote awareness about service-learning by:
  - placing service-learning on parent meeting agendas,
  - helping teachers and students showcase service-learning at Back-to-School night,
  - writing an article for the school newspaper, and
  - assisting students to create service-learning displays.



Being involved in your child's education sends a direct message to your child that learning matters. When you support service-learning, you also teach your children that at every age we can be contributing members of society.

### Parent encouragement of their child's involvement in service-learning

If your child is participating in a service-learning experience, express support to your child, your child's teacher, and school administrators. Ask how you can be helpful. Have conversations with your child about community issues. Read books and newspaper articles on the topics with your child for shared experiences and to learn together.

### Parent participation in non-school settings

Wherever youth gather, service-learning is a way to engage in meaningful activities that benefit everyone. A service-learning approach may include leadership development, surveys of community needs, and plans that allow youth to transform ideas into action. Discuss with program staff ways parents can be helpful throughout the process.

For more information, contact the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at [www.servicelearning.gov](http://www.servicelearning.gov).

"Service-learning is a natural extension of the civic mission of schools—giving students from all backgrounds a better education while giving our society better citizens. It's a win-win, a bridge between the classroom and the community that brings passion and energy to both."

**Elizabeth Burmaster**

*Former Wisconsin  
State Superintendent*

"We know that service-learning benefits young people in a variety of ways. As individuals, service-learning improves self-esteem and self-confidence, and reduces involvement in risky behavior. As citizens, service-learning gives young people an increased sense of civic responsibility and a commitment to community involvement. As students, service-learning helps improve school performance and academic engagement."

**Dr. William Richardson**

*Former President & CEO  
W.K. Kellogg Foundation*

"Schools and college campuses are rediscovering their role in citizenship education, including through a great idea called service-learning—an approach that weaves academic study with real-world problem-solving through community service. We can all join in as mentors, partners, and supporters..."

**Angus King**

*Former Maine Governor*

# What can I do to be sure service-learning is a part of my child's education?

## Is service-learning happening at your child's school?

Talk to teachers and administrators to find out whether service-learning is already taking place at your child's school.

### **Yes!** *What now?*

1. Let your support be known! Talk to your child's teachers and/or school administrators to find out how you might be able to help.
2. Make sure that those in charge of service-learning at your child's school are aware of all the great resources available through the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse.
3. Consider working with the PTA—the parent, teacher, student association—or another parent/teacher organization to develop a plan for parents to be of support to teachers. The PTA recognizes that collaboration with the community strengthens schools, families, and student learning. Service-learning is an excellent way to foster partnerships with the community. Support your child in helping the community!

Visit [www.pta.org](http://www.pta.org) for more information.

### **No.** *What now?*

1. Take copies of *Service-Learning in Action* ([www.servicelearning.gov/service-learning-action](http://www.servicelearning.gov/service-learning-action)) to your child's school to inform teachers and administrators of the benefits of service-learning.
2. School administrators may welcome articles on the impacts of service-learning in education, such as the NSLC fact sheet, *Impacts of Service-Learning on Participating K-12 Students* ([www.servicelearning.gov/instant\\_info/fact\\_sheets/k-12\\_facts/impacts](http://www.servicelearning.gov/instant_info/fact_sheets/k-12_facts/impacts)). Other articles and research on service-learning topics can be found on [www.servicelearning.gov](http://www.servicelearning.gov).

**Get involved in other service-learning opportunities.** Service-learning doesn't just happen in schools! Inquire at local youth, community, or faith-based organizations to find existing service-learning programs where your child can be involved. If the organizations are not involved in service-learning, introduce them to its benefits.

Visit the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse "I'm a Parent or Volunteer" page for additional information on service-learning and a list of websites where you can search for volunteering and/or service-learning opportunities in your area:

[www.servicelearning.gov/what-you-do/parent-volunteer](http://www.servicelearning.gov/what-you-do/parent-volunteer).

# Find out more

## *Resources*

**For more about service opportunities in your area and additional resources, visit the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse "I'm a Parent or Volunteer" page at [www.servicelearning.gov/what-you-do/parent-volunteer](http://www.servicelearning.gov/what-you-do/parent-volunteer).**

**Books** can help you learn more, see examples of service-learning projects, and promote service-learning in the community.

- *The Busy Family's Guide to Volunteering: Do good, have fun, make a difference as a family!* by Jenny Lynn Friedman, Robins Lane Press, 2003. An informative compilation of ideas and resources to involve every family member in collaborative projects.
- *The Complete Guide to Service Learning: Proven, Practical Ways to Engage Students in Civic Responsibility, Academic Curriculum, & Social Action* by Cathryn Berger Kaye, Free Spirit Publishing, 2010. A comprehensive resource for teachers, youth workers, and parents that covers service-learning planning and implementation, with over 300 examples of service-learning scenarios.
- *The Kid's Guide to Social Action*, by Barbara Lewis, Free Spirit Publishing, 1998. A useful resource packed with information for helping kids transform their ideas into results, with many stories of accomplishments.
- *Parent Involvement in Service Learning*, by Cathryn Berger Kaye, National Dropout Prevention Center, 1998. Part of the Linking Learning with Life series, this publication offers ideas to involve parents in supporting service-learning in schools and engaging in service-learning as a family.



Written by Cathryn Berger Kaye, M.A. © 2011 National Service-Learning Clearinghouse.

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