



# Impacts of Service-Learning on Participating K-12 Students

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Recent research emphasizes academic, civic/citizenship, social/personal, and resilience impacts of service-learning on participating K-12 students.

## Academic Impacts

A number of studies have been conducted showing promising results of the academic impact of service-learning. Students who participated in service-learning were found to have scored higher than nonparticipating students in several studies, particularly in social studies, writing, and English/language arts. They were found to be more cognitively engaged and more motivated to learn. Studies show great promise for service-learning as an avenue for increasing achievement among alternative school students and other students considered at risk of school failure.

Studies on school engagement generally show that service-learning students are more cognitively engaged in school, but not necessarily more engaged behaviorally. Studies of students' problem-solving abilities show strong increases in cognitive complexity and other related aspects of problem solving. Service-learning, then, does appear to have a positive impact on students by helping them to engage cognitively in school and score higher in certain content areas on state tests. Many of these outcomes are mediated by the quality of the program. For example:

***California Service-Learning Programs*** (Ammon, Furco, Chi & Middaugh, 2001) Researchers found that academic impacts were related to clarity of academic goals and activities, scope, and support through focused reflection.

***Civic Engagement and High School Academic Progress: An Analysis Using NELS Data*** (Dávila & Mora, 2007) A review of data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS) suggested that participation in civic engagement activities including voluntary community service, service-learning, and student government during high school years enhanced academic achievement.

***Philadelphia Need in Deed Initiative Study*** (Billig, 2003) Sixth-grade students who participated in the service-learning approach had statistically significantly higher scores on the Terra Nova, a standardized test, in the areas of science and language arts; however, the same effects were not found for other grade levels. Data analyses showed that the differences may be attributable to the content and quality of the service-learning experience.

***Role of Service-Learning in Enhancing Student Achievement*** (Furco, 2007) A review of research indicates that high quality service-learning, because of its utilization of effective, experiential learning strategies, can enhance academic



outcomes in such content areas as reading, writing, mathematics, and science. A variety of studies have shown evidence of a range of achievement-related benefits from service-learning, including improved attendance, higher grade point averages, enhanced preparation for the workforce, enhanced awareness and understanding of social issues, greater motivation for learning, and heightened engagement in prosocial behaviors.

### **Civic/Citizenship Impacts**

Typically, the area of civics and citizenship contains calls for the acquisition of knowledge (most often reflected in standards and measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress), skills, and dispositions or virtues. Service-learning research in the area of civic engagement and citizenship is growing exponentially, especially in response to these calls for increased civic education.

Most, but not all, of the studies of service-learning and its impact on various measures of civic engagement, show that service-learning has positive results, particularly for the domains of civic skills and dispositions. The mixed results in these studies have been analyzed by the researchers as being related to the quality and intention of service-learning programs. When service-learning is intentionally oriented to a civic outcome, it appears to produce that outcome most of the time, especially for high school students. However, for many programs, civic engagement is not an intentional goal, and in those cases, it appears that service-learning may not accomplish civic outcomes as well as some other deliberate interventions. See, for example:

***Building Citizenship: How Student Voice in Service-Learning Develops Civic Values*** (Morgan & Streb, 2001) Student voice in service-learning projects is positively correlated with improved self-concept, political engagement, and tolerance.

***Carnegie Corporation Study of High School Civic Engagement*** (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005) Service-learning students had higher scores of enjoyment of school overall than comparison group peers and were significantly more likely to report intending to vote than comparison students. Duration of the service-learning experience, student decision making, teacher characteristics, experience using service-learning, and active teaching strategies were all associated with higher civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

***Colorado Learn and Serve Program*** (Kim & Billig, 2003; Klute, Sandel, & Billig, 2002) Results showed a statistically significant difference in connection to community, connection to school, and civic responsibility for those participating in service-learning relative to their nonparticipating peers.

***Impact of Service-Learning on Transitions to Adulthood*** (Martin, Neal, Kielsmeier, & Crossley, 2006) A nationally representative survey examined the ways in which service-learning involvement affected youths' development of attributes associated with adulthood. Compared to their peers, young adults who participated in K-12 service-learning were more likely to discuss politics or community issues and vote in an election year, more politically and socially connected to their communities, both as leaders and role models, and more active members of society.

## **Social/Personal Impacts**

Over the years, the social and personal impacts of service-learning have been most frequently documented. Typical outcome areas that were shown to be strongly related to service-learning included self-efficacy, respect for diversity, self-confidence, collaborative skills, avoidance of risk behaviors, and resilience (Billig, 2000). Over the past few years, the number of studies in this area has declined.

Researchers in the social-emotional learning field, however, have embraced service-learning as a key strategy for accomplishing the five core social-emotional competencies (self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making) that all young people should develop (Fredericks, 2003). Social emotional learning theorists believe that “social emotional learning provides the skills while service-learning provides the opportunities to apply the skills” (p. 1). Recent studies have focused on:

### ***Career exploration***

Several recent studies affirmed the research that has consistently shown the value of service-learning in helping young people explore career options. Yamauchi and colleagues (2006), for example, showed students in service-learning relative to nonparticipating students had a stronger set of job and career related skills and aspirations, including knowledge of how to plan activities, desire to pursue postsecondary education, and job interview skills. Furco (2002) found strong statistically significant differences on formulation of career plans and emphasis on finding a career that was personally satisfying and/or beneficial to others between the service-learning and service groups and the nonparticipants.

### ***Ethics***

Several studies of the impact of service-learning participation on ethics have recently been conducted. In these studies, ethics were generally defined as students’ willingness to stand up for what is right, the development of strong moral values and judgments, willingness to intervene for the sake of justice, and development of a strong sense of right and wrong, good and bad.

- Furco (2002) found that there were statistically significant differences between service and service-learning participants and nonparticipants on all measures of ethics, with far more positive ratings for those who participate in service or service-learning.
- Leming (2001) examined whether service-learning reflection that contained an ethical reasoning component impacted student agency (feeling that they could make a difference), social relatedness, and political-moral awareness. Students with the ethical component within their service-learning program were compared to those who engaged in community service with reflection but without the ethical component and with those who did not participate in service.
- Leming found that after one semester, high school students with the ethical component in their service-learning program scored much higher on the ethics measures (essay prompts scored according to an ethical awareness index) than students in either of the other conditions. In both service-learning conditions, students scored higher than nonparticipants on measures of social responsibility and anticipated future participation in community affairs. There were no differences on measures of self-esteem.

## ***Resilience***

A study of the Lions Quest program by Laird and Black (2002b) examined students' risk behaviors such as potential for dropping out of school, use of alcohol and other substances, and misconduct. They also conducted surveys that documented degrees of participation in service-learning and a checklist of personal gains. These studies affirmed the strong evidence from earlier research summarized by Billig (2000) that service-learning produces an array of positive impacts in the area of prosocial behaviors, acceptance of diversity, connection to cultural heritage, development of ethics, and strengthening of protective factors related to resilience. Service-learning clearly helps students to develop caring, altruism, and other social emotional learning.

- Ninth-grade students who participated in service-learning classes had statistically significantly more positive scores on all measures of resilience, and 12th-grade service-learning students maintained a low risk of dropping out compared to their nonparticipating peers, including those identified as being at high risk initially.
- Those students who participated in environmental service-learning projects had higher scores on interpersonal attitude scales than those who participated in other forms of service.
- Those involved in human service projects started out with lower scores and gained more than others.
- Those with more service hours showed higher scores on several areas, particularly measures of positive community values and interpersonal competencies.
- Ninth-grade students were also more likely to decrease their cigarette smoking if they engaged in service-learning.

A study of a three-year Corporation for National Service demonstration project in Wisconsin (Potts, 2000) looked at the success of fostering resiliency through service-learning in two geographical areas of the state. The project paired middle school students and university students in more than 100 service-learning projects.

Middle school students reported lower rates of certain risk behaviors, higher levels of leadership and ability to resist danger, higher levels of positive peer influence, higher rates of homework and school engagement, higher interpersonal competence, and increased involvement in service to others.

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*For a more detailed discussion, including references and documentation, see the complete online fact sheet at [www.servicelearning.org/instant\\_info/fact\\_sheets/k-12\\_facts/impacts/expanded.php](http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/k-12_facts/impacts/expanded.php)*

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