G2G

Growing to Greatness 2008

The State of Service-Learning

A REPORT FROM THE NATIONAL YOUTH LEADERSHIP COUNCIL
In K-12 settings across the United States and throughout the world, the practice of service-learning is growing. This public is becoming aware of service-learning and its value. Opinion polls (see references) show that parents, community members, and educators alike value the connection between schools and their communities, and the use of service as an enhancement to traditional instruction. Stakeholders also agree that schools have a strong academic and civic purpose, and for any practice to be sustained in schools, it must reach outcomes in these domains.

Service-learning has the potential for reaching these outcomes, and in many cases, succeeds. Too few educators within a school or community-based organization, however, understand and utilize the principles of effective practice for service-learning to achieve the desired cognitive and behavioral gains. For service-learning to continue its growth and become a core teaching method in U.S. education, institutionalized beyond its dedicated practitioners, key principles of effective practice must be implemented consistently. The principles must be based on research that shows what works and, when adequate research is not available, on the professional wisdom of long-time effective practitioners. Further, in this age of accountability, it may be necessary to have standards in place that can serve as a way to assess and improve practice.

The service-learning field has a long history of self-examination. Dating back to a Wingspread Conference held in 1989 on the “Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service with Learning,” as documented by the Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform as of Principles of Effective Practice for K-12 Service-Learning. (See Figure 1.) The Eight Principles of Effective Practice were created and further reviewed of the field that “celebration” is an aspect of practice. Certain elements were removed because they were definitional. For example, the “preparation” element was removed because it was considered a program component rather than an effective practice. Other elements, such as “duration,” were added because they were closely supported by research.

rubrics were presented to participants at the 2005 Wingspread Conference on Service-Learning Practice Excellence. After that meeting, a committee to help facilitate the formation of national standards was created and further reviewed of the 10 elements. As a result of those meetings, the Essential Elements were again reviewed and distilled. Recent research has reviewed in the context of standards-based reform, and practices that appeared to predict outcomes were discussed in detail. (Much of this research appears in “Unpacking What Works in Service-Learning,” found in this volume of Growing to Greatness.) Certain elements were removed because they were definitional. For example, the “preparation” element was removed because it was considered a program component rather than an effective practice. Other elements, such as “duration,” were added because they were clearly supported by research.

Parents, community members, and educators alike value the connection between schools and their communities, and the use of service as an enhancement to traditional instruction.
researchers will converge to develop standards from the principles, complete with benchmarks and indicators based on the research review: ‘Traditionally, standards-setting processes will be used. In an interactive fashion, the group will draft behavioral descriptions of exemplary practices and, if possible, define performance levels and operational descriptions of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that must be demonstrated at each level. The ultimate success of the part of the process will be determined by the clarity of the behavioral definitions, the veracity of the research base from which they are derived, and their ability to drive practice. Feedback from Reactor Panels. These draft standards will be reviewed by 10 panels of service-learning professionals, conducted in conjunction with Learn and Serve meetings and other existing venues. It is expected that the standards will be refined in terms of their clarity and their conceptual soundness, and even the degree to which each standard represents an essential practice. Standards-writing is a consensus process and thus will be vetted in multiple venues. The iterative process allows differences to be resolved and distills areas of consensus and disagreement. Synthesis. The convening committee will synthesize the feedback from the reactor panels and use the results to refine the standards and develop benchmark.

Standards Dissemination. The approved standards will be disseminated within national conferences, professional development training, online coursework, and partnerships with teacher education programs nationwide. Other Steps Toward Professionalizing Practice. Concurrent with this effort to codify the Principles of Effective Practice, the development of an online-service-learning certification program, piloted by NLC in tandem with the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. The certification program integrates the Principles of Effective Practice within a guided study program to recognize exemplary practice. The pilot group completed its studies fall 2005. The model is under refinement, and the more cohorts will go through the process spring and fall 2007.

Conclusion

These steps will take a great deal of time and effort. The end result, though, will be better practice that leads to more robust outcomes for service-learning practitioners and a greater likelihood of sustaining the practice of service-learning for decades to come. We invite you to join us in this development effort by volunteering to be on panels or to become a reactor. Once the standards are drafted, we hope that you will adopt them into your practice and help us by measuring and reporting the results. Together, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers can make a difference and reach the goals of giving every student an opportunity to participate in service-learning and of helping every participant to gain maximum benefit from their participation.

REFERENCES


Morrison D. et al. (2001), the National Survey on Service Learning and Service Learning in the National. New York: Creative Action Network.

www.ncse.org and www.cfnc.org


Many individuals associated with service-learning have seen the ways in which participation can change lives. Some young people find that they are successful in school for the first time in a long time. Others report that service-learning gave them a career direction and a sense of purpose. Still others say that their participation convinced them that “kids can make a difference” in how communities operate and in meeting the needs of others (Billig 2004). In short, quality matters, and it matters even more as service-learning practice spreads.

While these sentiments are not uncommon, they do not represent the outcomes for all service-learning programs. As the practice of service-learning becomes more popular, the ways in which service-learning is implemented have varied dramatically, often with results that are disappointing, yielding few or no positive impacts. As practitioners have noted for many years, service-learning outcomes count more than ever. Fortunately, however, the practices are not always as obvious as they seem. This article provides a brief examination of what works, the evidence behind it, and examples of what service-learning practice spreads.

Eight Promising Practices

**CURRICULUM INTEGRATION**

Curriculum integration is defined here as using service-learning as an instructional method to help students master content standards. Studies have shown that with strong integration, students’ test scores in the subject matter area with which service-learning is integrated can increase significantly (Billig and Klute 2003; Billig, Klute, and Sandel 2003; Mertz, Billig, and Hofschire 2004; Santmire, Giraud, and Grodekop 1999). In these studies, curriculum integration meant that service-learning was planned and implemented with specific learning objectives in mind. The learning objectives were tied to the content standards or the specific areas of knowledge and skills that students are meant to acquire. However, the practices are not always as obvious as they seem. This article provides a brief examination of what works, the evidence behind it, and examples of what those promising practices could look like in K-12 and afterschool settings.

In this age of educational accountability, outcomes count more than ever. Fortunately, the research in K-12 service-learning has begun to illuminate what it is about service-learning design that promotes stronger outcomes, particularly in the areas of academics and civics. This article explores eight promising service-learning practices. These eight emerged from the past several years of collecting research on what works, and from recent studies that tested the Essential Elements of Service-Learning (National Service-Learning Cooperative and National Youth Leadership Council 1999) and other indicators defined as being associated with quality practice in the field. Each of the eight that emerged as predictors of positive outcomes has statistical evidence of effectiveness in several studies, either within the field of service-learning or in a closely related field of educational reform. However, the practices are not always as obvious as they seem. This article provides a brief examination of what works, the evidence behind it, and examples of what those promising practices could look like in K-12 and afterschool settings.

**Reflection, and Demonstration Phases of the Service-Learning Experience**

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The implications of these combined results mean that educators should integrate service-learning into curricula by engaging in the same kind of lesson or unit planning that they use for any other teaching method. Teachers start with the standard or curricular objective; think about (and possibly discuss with students) how they will address the standard within the preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration phases of the service-learning experience.
Each year, one-third (33 percent) of all students who enter a public high school drop out. The situation is even worse in inner-city areas, where one out of every two students (50 percent) who enters a public high school does not graduate. More than half of the nation’s high school dropouts have left school by the 10th grade (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morrison 2006; Barton 2005; Pittman 2005). 1

As for the students who remain in school, the statistics are equally grim. Despite five years of the No Child Left Behind Act and in goal to improve academic achievement in reading and mathematics through increased standardized testing and accountability, the overall academic achievement of students remains less than satisfactory. While student performance on some standardized reading and mathematics measures has improved slightly, 1) the difference in scores for a single student from one point in time to another has decreased since the passage of NCLB (Gronin, Kingsbury, McCall, and Rose 2005). While it is premature to assess the overall impact of NCLB on students’ academic performance, the early results are not promising.

The lack of student academic achievement is particularly evident when comparing the achievement levels of U.S. students with those of students from other countries, especially in the subject areas of mathematics and science (National Center for Education Statistics 2006). For example, on the mathematics portion of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s 2004 Programme for International Assessment, U.S. students ranked 24th out of the 29 countries that participated in the program. In science, U.S. students scored an average of 24 percent on the physics portion of the most recent Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, compared to the 75 percent overall average score achieved by students from other participating countries. Analyses also reveal continued lower overall academic performance among poorer students when compared to students from more affluent communities, as well as lower academic performance among African-American and Latino students when compared to Caucasian and Asian students (National Center for Education Statistics 2006; Scales and Rothkopfstein 2005).

1 It should be noted that there is much debate over how to best calculate high school dropout and completion rates. For example, Greene and Winters rely on data from the National Center for Education Statistics for their calculation, which results in an overall high school completion rate of 67% and a completion rate of 50% for both African-Americans and Hispanics. In contrast, the census bureau uses data from the Current Population Study and reports the completion rate to be 90% overall, 88% for African-Americans and 76% for Hispanics. For an analysis of the debate regarding high school dropout rate calculations, see L. Mishel and H. Roehlkepartain (2006).
Empowering Young People
Project CATALYST — California Taking Action for Learning through Youth Service Teams — is a statewide network of 28 service-learning youth ambassadors supported by Youth Service California. Operations through the state’s regional infrastructure, these ambassadors promote service-learning to their peers, communities, and the media.

Los Angeles
The 2007 graduating class of the Los Angeles Unified School District was the first to meet the district’s service-learning requirement of completing a core curriculum course with a district-approved service-learning component. Qualifying service-learning experiences included the following components: core academic learning, meaningful service, student voice, reflection, and collaboration. In preparation for meeting this requirement, the district’s American history and civics teachers were trained by regional service-learning network leaders.

The LAUSD Board of Education also adopted a resolution on Civic Education mandating full-classroom service-learning to support academics in a democratic society. This resolution may lead to deeper connections between service-learning and civics education in Los Angeles schools.

California

Support through Policy

Through its statewide focus on standards, California has been putting additional emphasis on the value of giving back and importance of engaging in the broader community.

In 2007 the California School Boards Association renamed and updated the service-learning sample board policy to align it more closely with the California Department of Education’s vision that 50 percent of all districts in the state will involve students in a service-learning experience. The new policy urges implementation of service-learning as an instructional method and includes optional language for school boards that choose to require community service as a condition of graduation. This boiler-plate policy language coincides with the California Department of Education’s vision that 50 percent of all districts in the state will involve students in a service-learning experience at least once in elementary, middle, and high school — three times during their K-12 education.

Learn and Serve

Through funding provided by Learn and Serve America, the California Department of Education’s CalServe Initiative supports school and community programs that involve more than 200,000 students in service-learning each year. In a statewide study of CalServe programs, teachers reported that 85 percent of their students met or exceeded academic content standards delivered through service-learning activities (CDE 2007).

Building Supportive Networks
CalServe partnered with the nonprofit Youth Service California to support California’s Regional Service-Learning Network Program. Twelve Regional Service-Learning Networks, established to build capacity for service-learning throughout the state, hosted trainings and facilitated collaboration among the region’s key stakeholders.

In September the Department of Education launched the California Service-Learning Leader Schools Award Program. The awards, recognizing schools for service-learning excellence and program sustainability, will be presented at the 2008 California Service-Learning Leadership Institute, hosted by Youth Service California and the CalServe Initiative in the California Department of Education. The annual institute gathers state service-learning leaders and practitioners to focus on how to develop policy, deepen practice, and learn strategies to increase their organizations’ capacity to support and sustain service-learning.

Afterschool

Many resources in the state have been directed toward out-of-school time programs. As part of these efforts, Youth Service California launched the California Afterschool Service-Learning program in 2005, focusing on seven communities with high concentrations of low-income economic status populations. Evaluators found that young people who participated in the program scored above California norms on measures of external and internal assets as measured by the California Healthy Kids Survey (McCarthy 2007).

Youth Service California expanded their work in afterschool service-learning by publishing a guide, Service-Learning in Afterschool Programs: Resources for Afterschool Educators (2006) and through management of the State Commission’s Cesar Chavez After School Program. During the past year, 75 Cesar Chavez afterschool clubs have opened across the state.

Cosumnes River Preserve

is a 40,000-acre haven for environmental education and service-learning for students in Elk Grove and Highland School Districts. Your support helps local community partners including the Bureau of Land Management, Department of Fish and Game, and The Nature Conservancy. Cosumnes takes multiple service-learning opportunities in partnership with the school districts. Teachers are invited to workshops at the preserve to integrate the environmental projects with academic standards in math, language arts, science, social studies, and fine art.

In the Oak Riparian Restoration Project, 1,200 students from Cosumnes River High School learned about the importance of creating habitat for local wildlife. After a year of planning and construction, students were able to evaluate their project with measuring tools and specially trained experts.
Support through Policy

Through its statewide focus on standards, California has been putting additional emphasis on the learning in service-learning. Due to this strengthening of curricular connections, service-learning is increasingly viewed as a way to improve cross-curricular integration. Jack O’Connell, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction noted, “Successful schools all over our state are combining academic standards with service-learning in projects that teach the value of giving back and importance of engaging in the broader community.”

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The LAUSD Board of Education also adopted a resolution on Civic Education mandating formal education that enables students to assume their responsibilities as citizens in a democratic society. This resolution may lead to deeper connections between service-learning and civic education in Los Angeles schools.

Cosumnes River Preserve

is a 46,000-acre haven for environmental education and service-learning for students in Galt Elementary and High School Districts. With broad support from community partners, including the Bureau of Land Management, Department of Fish and Game, and The Nature Conservancy, Cosumnes hosts multiple service-learning opportunities in partnership with the school districts. These opportunities are intended to sustain the preservation of the land and integrate the environmental projects with academic standards in math, language arts, science, social studies, and the arts.

In the Oak Parkway Riparian Restoration Project, 1,000 students annually are bringing back the native cottonwoods of the preserve’s riparian corridor. Young people make custom tool kits to preserve the riparian habitat and plant the plants, high school students will soon be involved in a mentoring project. In recent years, the students have planted 20 acres of native plants, including grasses, wildflowers, and the California Buckwheat. The students are integrating the cottonwoods and eight grade students plant the trees, high school students will be involved in a mentoring project.

When students see the trees they’ve planted, they know they’re making a difference in their community. Students are inspired to seek additional service opportunities,” said Service-learning Coordinator John Durand.
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