



RESOURCES:

The **National Service-Learning Clearinghouse** is a comprehensive information system that focuses on all dimensions of service learning, covering kindergarten through higher education school-based as well as community-based initiatives. (<http://nicsl.jaws.umn.edu/>)

Billig, S. H. (2000). **Research on K-12 school-based service learning: The evidence builds.** *Phi Delta Kappan*, 81, 658-664.

Rockwell, S. (2001). **Service learning: Barriers, benefits, and models of excellence.** *Beyond Behavior*, 10, 16-21.

Skinner, R., & Chapman, C. (Sept., 1999). **Service learning & community service in K-12 public schools.** Washington, DC: National Center for Educational statistics.

Service learning is variously defined, and discussion of its definition is often the source of disagreement among its proponents. The National Society for Experiential Education, for example, defines service learning as “any carefully monitored service experience in which a student has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what he or she is learning throughout the experience.” While disagreement about the definition of service-learning persists, there is general consensus that its major components include “active participation, thoughtfully organized experiences, focus on community needs and school/community coordination, academic curriculum integration, structured time for reflection, opportunities for application of skills and knowledge-extended learning opportunities and development of a sense of caring for others.” (Billig, 2000)

Overview: What is Service Learning?

At every level of schooling, youth participation in service is at an all-time high. The growing commitment of young people to contribute voluntarily to larger issues through service is well-documented. In the past decade, service learning has grown by leaps and bounds. From 1984 through 1997, the number of K-12 students involved in service programs rose from 900,000 to 12,605,740, and the percentage of high school students participating in service-learning nationwide increased from 2% to 25%.

In 1995, Independent Sector reported that 59% of teenagers volunteered an estimated 3.5 hours per week. These figures are comparable to the findings of the 1996 National Household Education Survey, conducted by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Research and Improvement, which found that 49% of students in grades 6 to 12 in public and private schools participated in community service during the 1995-96 school year. Of the students volunteering, 86% were in schools that endorsed volunteer service by requiring participation or by arranging the opportunities.

What We Know About Service Learning

New research reveals a close association between achieving intended results and adherence to standards (Kielsmeier, 2000). Research from service learning program evaluations show many promising, positive outcomes. Students who participate in service learning are less likely to engage in “risk” behaviors, and instead are more engaged in their studies and more motivated to learn. Service learning has also been shown to have a positive effect on students’ interpersonal development and the ability to relate to culturally diverse groups. Research indicates that it helps to develop students’ sense of civic and social responsibility as well as their citizenship skills. In addition, an increase in mutual respect between teachers and students has been evidenced with service learning. Finally, service learning has the potential to help students to become more knowledgeable and realistic about careers and to foster more positive perceptions of schools and youths on the part of community members (Billig, 2000).

Researchers caution that the majority of research on service learning to date has come from service learning project evaluations. Further research is still needed to provide deeper understandings and texture to our knowledge of

how service learning produces its outcomes. There is not enough research to date to identify which types of students are most affected or which specific program designs yield the most results.

Making it Work

While there are some disagreements on the definition of service learning, there is a relative consensus on standards for quality. The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse has put forth a list of Essential Elements of Service-Learning, which include the following:

- Clear educational goals that require the application of concepts, content and skills from the academic disciplines and involve students in the construction of their own knowledge.
- Students are engaged in tasks that challenge and stretch them cognitively and developmentally.
- Assessment is used as a way to enhance student learning as well as to document and evaluate how well students have met content and skill standards.
- Students are engaged in service tasks that have clear goals, meet genuine needs in the school or community, and have significant consequences for themselves and others.
- Student voice is maximized in selecting, designing, implementing, and evaluating the service project.
- Diversity is valued, as demonstrated by its participants, its practice, and its outcomes.
- Communication and interaction with the community are promoted, and partnerships and collaboration are encouraged.
- Students are prepared for all aspects of their service work. They possess a clear understanding of tasks and roles, as well as the skills and information required by the tasks, awareness of safety precautions, and knowledge about and sensitivity to the people with whom they will be working.
- Student reflection takes place before, during and after service; uses multiple methods that encourage critical thinking; and is a central force in the design and fulfillment of curricular objectives
- Multiple methods are designed to acknowledge, celebrate, and further validate students' service work. (Billig, 2000)

Educators are faced with very real challenges (e.g. scheduling, mandated curriculum guidelines, limited resources) in our schools today. By understanding the benefits of service learning, developing a formula for incorporating current frameworks into the service-learning program, and identifying methods of accessing resources, these challenges can be overcome (Rockwell, 2001). Service learning should not be viewed as another obstacle or challenge but rather as a potential resource for both teachers and students.

Conclusion

With more and better research in the next decade, the passion with which practitioners pursue service learning and believe in its outcomes can be supported in more conventional and databased ways. Only time will tell whether service-learning will be sustained and whether the ethic of service, combined with learning, will become institutionalized as an important philosophy within our schools.

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About the Safe & Responsive Schools Project

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project, funded by a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, is dedicated to developing and studying prevention-based approaches to school safety. The Project is currently working with schools in districts in Indiana and Nebraska to integrate best-practice strategies in school violence prevention into comprehensive school-based plans for deterring school disruption and violence. **Visit our web site: www.indiana.edu/~safeschl.**

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