

Service-learning: What the Research Says

What is service-learning?

Service-learning is an educational strategy that involves students in meaningful service to their communities and/or to society, while engaging them in some form of reflection or study that is related to the service. Well-designed service-learning projects connect with, reinforce, enrich, and enhance what students learn in the classroom by providing them with opportunities to apply classroom content and skills in solving real-world problems.

Quality Matters in Service-Learning

High quality service-learning is characterized by projects that...

- Meet actual community needs
- Are integrated into the student's academic curriculum so that service goals and learning goals blend together and enrich each other
- Give students a choice (voice) in selecting, designing and implementing the service project
- Enable students to have direct contact with those being served
- Provide students with structured time to think, talk, write, and/or reflect in other ways about what they saw, did, felt, and learned during their service experience (reflection must be cognitively challenging)
- Are led by teachers who are experienced in facilitating service-learning approaches

How Does Service-Learning Relate to What Do People Want from Schools?

A Roper poll conducted in 2000 indicated that

- 90% believe that success requires more than mastering the "basics"
- 68% believe that schools have a clear responsibility to link what youth learn in school to the skills they will need at work and in their communities

When given a definition of service-learning:

- 90% believe that service-learning could be an important tool in helping schools to achieve both their academic and civic missions
- 62% would support service-learning if it helped to strengthen students' interest in school
- 89% would support service-learning if it helped to improve students' grasp of academic subjects
- 89% would support service-learning if it helped to support students' long-term social and civic development
- 90% believe that service-learning can help build skills that students need to be successful later in life
- 90% value the role service-learning can play in fostering partnerships between schools and communities

What are the Results/Benefits of High Quality Service-Learning

There is an ever-increasing body of research showing that high quality service-learning positively impacts students, schools, and communities.

➤ *Service-learning helps students acquire academic skills and knowledge – students engaged in high quality service-learning:*

- *Showed moderate to strong gains on student achievement tests in language arts and/or reading, school engagement, sense of educational accomplishment, and homework completion*

- *Had higher scores on state tests of basic skills and higher grades*
 - *Showed improved problem-solving skills and increased interest in academics*
 - *Service-learning tutoring programs also helped “at risk” student to improve grade point averages and decreased the likelihood that these students would drop out of school*
- **Service-learning has a positive effect on the personal development of youth in the following areas** – students engaged in high quality service-learning:
- *Showed increases in personal and social responsibility, communication, and a sense of educational competence*
 - *Demonstrated a higher sense of responsibility than students in control groups*
 - *Were more likely to treat each other kindly, help each other, and care about doing their best*
- **Students who participate in service-learning are less likely to engage in “risk” behaviors:**
- *They showed fewer behavioral problems and were less likely to be referred to the office for disciplinary reasons*
 - *Showed reduced levels of alienation*
 - *When compared with youth not engaged in service, students engaged in service were about half as likely to engage risky behaviors such as binge drinking, problem drug use, problem cigarette use, promiscuous sexual activity,, vandalism, and skipping school.*
 - *When compared with youth not engaged in service, students engaged in service were about twice as likely to value sexual restraint*
- **Service-learning has a positive effect on student’s interpersonal development and the ability to relate to diverse groups:**
- *They were better able to trust and be trusted by others, be reliable, and accept responsibility*
 - *Were more likely to develop positive bonds with adults*
 - *Showed greater empathy with others and greater acceptance of cultural diversity*
 - *Showed increased awareness of cultural differences and attitudes toward helping others*
 - *Felt more comfortable communicating with ethnically diverse groups*
- **Service-learning helps to develop students’ sense of civic and social responsibility and their citizenship skills** – students engaged in high quality service-learning:
- *Showed increased awareness of community needs, believed they could make a difference, and were committed to service in the future*
 - *Were more likely to think about politics and morality in society; more likely to consider how to effect social change*
 - *Showed a greater sense of civic responsibility and an ethic of service*
 - *Showed increased understanding of how government works*
- **Service-learning provides an avenue to students to become active, positive contributors to society** – students engaged in high quality service-learning”
- *Were more likely to be engaged in community organizations and to vote*
 - *Showed increased political awareness*
- **Service-learning helps students become more knowledgeable and realistic about careers** – students engaged in high quality service-learning:

- *Showed gains in career related skills, communication skills, and positive increases in career exploration knowledge*
- *Showed more positive work orientation attitudes and skills*
- **Service-learning results in greater mutual respect among teachers and students. Engaging in service-learning leads to discussions of teaching and learning and best ways for students to learn.**
- **Service-learning improves the overall school climate.**
- **Service-learning leads to more positive perceptions of youth and their schools by community members.**

Why Does Service-Learning Work?

Research on learning indicates that we tend to remember more as our level of involvement in the learning process increases. *We remember 10% of what we read, 20% of what we hear, 30 % of what we see and hear and 75-90% of what we both say and do (practicing/applying what we learn in the classroom in real-world settings).*

Sources:

- *"What Service-Learning Is," L. Richard Bradley, Service-Learning Training Manual, Columbus, OH, Ohio Department of Education, 1998.*
- *S. Billig and S. Root, "Impact of Participation in Service-Learning on High School Students' Academic and Civic Engagement," paper presented at the 5th International Service-Learning Research Conference, East Lansing, MI, 2005.*
- *Roper Poll conducted November 2000, reported by Learning Indeed, W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2000.*
- *S. Billig, Research on K-12 school-based service-learning: The evidence builds, Phil Delta Kappan (81)9, 658-664.*

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