



Service-Learning

Status of Institutionalization

Education Commission of the States

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Service-Learning in the United States: Status of Institutionalization

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Service-learning takes students beyond the traditional classroom by integrating service to the community into the academic curriculum. In forming new connections to their communities, students experience an increase in academic achievement, career orientation, social development and civic response. They acquire a sense of efficacy, learn 21st century skills such as teamwork and problem solving, and engage in the broader world of their community and the society of their future. In 2000, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) conducted the first 50-state (and the District of Columbia) policy scan on service-learning, seeking to determine the status of institutionalization of service-learning in the states.

*"It is better to light one
small candle than it is to
curse the darkness."
~ Chinese proverb*

The 2000 scan only included review of state statutes, codes or regulations, and state board of education policies. It focused solely on the term *service-learning*, excluding terms like *community service*, which can be more broadly defined and often is tied to restitution and the justice system. The results were displayed simply, in a table showing each state and any relevant policies.

Analysis

In 2010 and 2011, the National Center for Learning and Citizenship (NCLC) at ECS conducted a new 50-state policy scan on service-learning and community service. Again, our intent was to capture all legislation relating to service-learning and community service, so we looked for state statute and code as well as state board of education policies. Wondering if service-learning was included in state standards or frameworks, we reviewed each state's Department of Education website.

The information relating to standards and frameworks is not all-inclusive, but rather a sample of how a state's standards and/or frameworks include service-learning and community service.

The terms *service-learning*, *community service* and *student service* are included in the 2010 scan for two reasons. First, many states use the terms *community service* and *student service*, instead of *service-learning*, to describe an activity that links classroom lessons to service in the community. Second, community service, even broadly defined, often is tied to a learning experience and thus implicitly helps facilitate, promote and support service-learning. In conducting this scan, ECS reviewed all policies dealing with service-learning, as well as community service and student service when they are connected to education.

Results of the 2010 policy scan for each state are organized according to the following categories (all related information can be accessed via the [NCLC database](#)):

- Statewide high school service requirement
- Credit toward graduation for service-learning and community service
- Districts explicitly permitted to adopt a service requirement for high school graduation
- Service-learning and community service included in standards or curriculum frameworks
- Service-learning and community service identified as an instructional strategy to increase student academic achievement
- Service-learning and community service identified as a strategy to increase student civic engagement
- Policies that support, encourage or require service-learning professional development for teachers or for administrators
- Funding provided by the state for service-learning and community service
- Funding provided by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS)
- Service-learning and community service identified as a means of preparing students for the workplace.

Inclusion in state statute and code gives service-learning validity and stability, and ensures that it is not subject to the varying interests and priorities of specific leaders. The commitment of district and school leaders is important, though the priorities of and support from superintendents can differ. As the ECS StateNote on the 2000 scan noted, “Without supportive public policies and the large-scale, long-term changes they can bring, funding could be taken away from service-learning programs, thus terminating them, whereas the institutionalization of a state statute or policy legitimizes the program through the law.”

It is encouraging to see how much progress has been made in institutionalizing service-learning through inclusion in state statute, code and board policy. In 2000, service-learning began to come into its own in terms of implementation. Teachers, principals and district superintendents started to see the merits of this teaching method. Service-learning could be found in some state statutes and codes.

The 2010 policy scan differs dramatically from the previous scan due to the increase in state legislation relating to service-learning and community service.

- In 2000, 27 states had some mention of service-learning in state policy; by 2011, that number jumped to 42 states
- Currently, 18 states award credit toward graduation for service-learning or community service, up from seven states in 2000
- In addition, service-learning or community service is included in benchmarks and instructional strategies in many states’ standards and/or frameworks
- Both the District of Columbia and Maryland allow high school service for graduation, although, strictly speaking, the D.C. requirement has no stated education connection, merely requiring “volunteer community service.” Maryland uses the term *student service* and requires that it include “preparation, action and reflection components,” all elements of the definition of service-learning.

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS

<p>Twenty-one states employ policies stating that student engagement is positively affected by participation in service-learning</p>	<p>Alabama, California, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, Washington D.C.</p>
<p>Eighteen states tie service-learning/ community service to student achievement</p>	<p>Alabama, California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Utah, West Virginia</p>

Six states allow a stand-alone, credit-bearing service-learning course	Georgia, Florida, Hawaii, Ohio, Mississippi, Tennessee
Thirty states identify service-learning or community service as a means of preparing students for the workplace	Alabama, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, Washington, West Virginia, Wyoming
In seven states, districts are explicitly authorized to adopt a service requirement for graduation	Colorado, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Wisconsin
Nine states include service-learning as a valuable strategy for at-risk students (dropout and suicide prevention programs)	Arkansas, Colorado, Kentucky, Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island

Summary

Despite the remarkable progress states have made in institutionalizing service-learning via policy, much service-learning is still practitioner dependent. State policies that institutionalize service-learning can strengthen and sustain it. Service-learning in policy can impact:

- **Hiring.** Newly hired teachers with service-learning experience come into the school ready to “hit the ground running.”
- **Curriculum.** Although a natural fit, service-learning doesn’t have to be taught only in social studies classes. Cross-curricular service-learning projects expand teaching and learning options.
- **Community partners.** Relationships can be strengthened between existing partners and the school, and a strong service-learning program is more appealing to potential community partners.

Service-learning is at a critical point right now. It is more important than ever to have policies in place that support and reward service-learning as an effective pedagogy leading to positive student academic and civic outcomes.

NCLC has developed a database of state policies to support service-learning for K-12 students. From this database, you can generate profiles of the policies for service-learning in individual states and view 50-state reports on policies for service-learning. To access reports from the database, visit:

www.ecs.org/html/educationIssues/ServiceLearning/SLDB_intro_sf.asp

For more information, contact: Brady Delander, 303.299.3622 or bdelander@ecs.org.

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