

# Service-Learning

## ► Why it matters

The term service-learning is used frequently these days, but confusion remains as to what it is and why it matters. More importantly, are there any measurable benefits? This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* looks at four research studies that explore the impact of service-learning on student achievement and civic engagement.

As defined by the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities.<sup>1</sup>

Over the last several decades, service-learning has grown tremendously throughout the United States at all education levels. For the past decade or more, the focus of most service-learning has focused on community engagement — service designed to improve the quality of life for community residents or to solve particular problems related to their needs.

More recently, however, the intended outcomes also include 21st century skills. Students involved in service-learning learn to work with others and sharpen skills in critical thinking and problem solving, and the current emphasis on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) has led to an increased focus on service-learning in STEM classrooms.

Over the next three years, as a recipient of the Learn and Serve America School-Based Grant Making Initiative, ECS hopes to contribute to the 'quality matters' discussion as we focus our attention and resources on measuring middle school student achievement in science and math in Schools of Success projects

### What's Inside

- Standards of quality
- The impact of quality service-learning on keeping kids in school, achievement and civic engagement



20  
09  
DECEMBER  
Vol. 10, No. 6

THE PROGRESS OF  
Education Reform



Education Commission  
of the States

## What have we learned about the impact of service-learning?

Research demonstrates that high-quality service-learning: strengthens academic achievement, school attendance and classroom engagement; connects students to their communities; and reduces risky behaviors.<sup>2</sup> With data collected by the Corporation for National & Community Service, researchers are able to measure the degree of service-learning implementation across the country and analyze the impact on participants. Among their findings, two things stand out:

- ▶ School-based service and service-learning sets young people on a pathway of service, making them more likely to volunteer in the future than those who have not participated.
- ▶ Students who participate in service-learning that incorporates the recommended elements of quality practice (see box) are more likely to believe they can make a difference in their community and are more likely to take interest in current events and politics than students whose service does not include the quality elements.

### **K-12 SL Standards for Quality Practice**

In 2008, the service-learning field released evidence-based standards and accompanying indicators that K-12 practitioners can use to ensure high-quality service-learning practice.

For decades, those involved in service-learning have known that quality matters if service-learning is to live up to its promise of helping young people grow in academics and civic engagement. Now educators have a set of standards and indicators to guide them in improving their practices.<sup>3</sup>

**Meaningful Service**

**Youth Voice**

**Link to Curriculum**

**Partnerships**

**Reflection**

**Progress Monitoring**

**Diversity**

**Duration and Intensity**

## Quality Service-Learning Can Strengthen Academic Achievement

### **Impact of Participation in School District of Philadelphia**

Shelley Billig, RMC Research Corporation, 2008.

This study analyzes the results of a four-year grant in a Philadelphia school district. Service-learning projects are conducted with community partners and involve students in researching social issues, planning for outcomes to meet community needs, providing the service and demonstrating results. All projects have strong ties to the district curriculum and are taught by well-prepared teachers. Quantitative data measures the extent to which character education outcomes are met.

#### **Selected results**

- ▶ Analysis of achievement and behavioral data shows that, on average, students participating in service-learning activities have higher scores on the state tests and exhibit more positive academic behaviors.
- ▶ Students from classrooms identified as being high in overall service-learning quality have higher writing scores on state tests, fewer tardies and higher average daily attendance rates than students from matched comparison classrooms.
- ▶ Over the course of the year, students who engage in service-learning activities for more than 30 hours have higher reading, science and writing scores, as well as significantly fewer tardies and greater average daily attendance than students from matched comparison classrooms.
- ▶ Teacher knowledge and skills matter. Students taught by teachers who had attended five or more service-learning related professional development activities have significantly higher science scores on state tests and higher average daily attendance than students from matched comparison classrooms.

### **Engaged for Success: Service-Learning as a Tool for Dropout Prevention**

John M. Bridgeland, John J. Dilulio Jr., Stuart C. Wulsin, Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the National Conference on Citizenship, April 2008.

This report presents original and secondary research showing the ability of service-learning to address some of the principle causes of dropping out. It also examines the results of focus groups of service-learning teachers who provide specific examples of how service-learning affects their students. Drawing upon research from a comprehensive national literature review, the study finds that service-learning improves almost every aspect of education, including graduation rates, and incorporates strategies most frequently recommended for preventing students from dropping out.

To a greater extent than community service, service-learning involves the application of classroom learning through investigation of a community problem, creation of a plan to solve it, action through service, reflection on both the experience and what was learned, and, finally, demonstration of results. Effective service-learning:

- ▶ Is integrated into the curriculum
- ▶ Involves cognitively challenging reflection activities
- ▶ Incorporates students' voices in decisionmaking
- ▶ Fosters diversity
- ▶ Includes monitoring of progress
- ▶ Has a significant duration
- ▶ Develops reciprocal partnerships with community organizations
- ▶ Requires students to participate in meaningful service.

The report suggests that service-learning not only could stem the tide of dropouts, but could create a new generation of youth who are academically prepared for success in college and possess a strong sense of civic responsibility.

## Quality Service-Learning Can Strengthen Civic Engagement

### “High School Community Service as a Predictor of Adult Voting and Volunteering”

Daniel Hart, Thomas M. Donnelly, James Youniss and Robert Atkins, *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 44, 2007, p. 197-219.

This study assesses the relation of civic knowledge, community service and extracurricular participation — all measured in high school — to civic participation in young adulthood. This National Educational Longitudinal study finds that both voluntary and school-required community services in high school are strong predictors of adult voting and volunteering. In addition, the study also finds that high school extracurricular participation is associated with higher rates of volunteering and voting in presidential elections in early adulthood.

High school civic knowledge also is associated with voting in early adulthood, but the magnitude of its relationship is very small. Moreover, the relation of high school coursework in the social sciences to civic knowledge is surprisingly weak. Because the effect of civic knowledge on civic engagement is weak, it does not seem cost-effective to attempt to promote civic engagement simply by increasing civic knowledge through increasing the number of civics courses taken.

### Educating for Democracy: Lessons from Chicago

Susan E. Spote, Joseph E. Kahne, Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, August 2007.

This longitudinal study, of close to 4,000 Chicago Public Schools high school juniors, looks at particular kinds of “best practices” for civic education. Along with other classroom practices, these include participating in service-learning projects, engaging in open classroom discussions about topics on which people have different opinions and working to solve community problems.

The study finds that service-learning experiences and in-class opportunities to learn about civic issues have a larger impact on students' commitment to civic participation than all of the other influences included in the research (students' demographics, academic achievement and prior level of civic commitments).

## Where can you go from here?

### Upcoming Studies

RMC Denver is looking at the impact of participation in service-learning in two sets of studies. One is a large-scale national random assignment longitudinal study sponsored by the Corporation for National Service. In partnership with Abt Associates, RMC will be looking at impacts on students in the areas of: academic engagement; academic performance including critical thinking skills; attendance; test results and dropout/graduation rates; and civic engagement.

The second study is a cluster analysis using a quasi-experimental design in eight states, examining academic engagement, 21st century skill acquisition, attendance, test scores, disciplinary data and dropout prevention. In some states, they also are measuring attitudes and achievement in STEM, aspirations, social-emotional learning and civic engagement.

### School of Success

For more about NCLC and our Schools of Success project, visit: [www.ecs.org/nclc](http://www.ecs.org/nclc).

“Regardless of student demographics, academic achievement, and prior level of civic commitments, our study showed that service-learning experiences and in-class opportunities to learn about civic issues have a larger impact on students' commitment to civic participation than all of the other influences included in the study — be it school, family or community-based.”

– “Educating for Democracy: Lessons from Chicago”

## Selected Findings

(From: *Educating for Democracy: Lessons from Chicago*)

### Classroom practices matter.

Activities that positively and significantly relate to students' commitment to civic participation include: service-learning; tracking current events; discussing problems in the community and ways to respond; frequently holding class discussions about controversial issues; making sure issues students care about are part of the curriculum; and exposing students to civic role models. These activities can take place in any class across the curriculum.

### Experiencing civic communities helps.

Students are more likely to express higher levels of commitment to civic participation when they see examples of neighbors dealing with problems in the community, feel they can count on adults to look after children, and when they have a general sense that their neighborhood supports young people. A similar pattern emerges in the measure of belonging to a school community. Students' sense that people at school care about them, that people at school are like family, and that they are part of a community also relates to the development of commitment to civic participation. Having parents who discuss current events with them contributes to students' commitment to civic participation.

### Extracurricular activities provide only modest support.

This study's findings lead the researchers to question the notion that schools can focus solely on traditional academics and leave the development of civic commitment to extracurricular programs. First, not all students participate in extracurricular activities. Second, even when they do, data suggest that the impact of participating in after-school clubs is quite modest and indicates that participating on sports teams is unrelated to the development of commitment to civic participation.

### Focusing on academic outcomes is insufficient.

Being part of a community of peers who support academic achievement has nowhere near the effect of participating in service-learning or being exposed to in-class civic learning opportunities.

### Demographics are not destiny.

Although other research has shown that demographics are highly predictive of students' academic outcomes, this study does not show that a similar relationship exists between the demographics of Chicago public high school students and their levels of civic commitment.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Learn and Serve America's National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, What is Service-Learning?, <http://www.servicelearning.org/what-service-learning> (accessed November 12, 2009).
- <sup>2</sup> Corporation for National & Community Service, *Learn and Serve Fact Sheet October 2009* (Washington D.C.: Corporation for National and Community Service, 2009).
- <sup>3</sup> K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice, National Youth Leadership Council (Saint Paul, MN: 2008), [http://www.nylc.org/pages-resourcecenter-downloads-K\\_12\\_Service\\_Learning\\_Standards\\_for\\_Quality\\_Practice?emoid=14:803](http://www.nylc.org/pages-resourcecenter-downloads-K_12_Service_Learning_Standards_for_Quality_Practice?emoid=14:803) (accessed November 18, 2009).

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This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* was made possible by a grant from the GE Foundation. If you have any questions regarding this issue, please contact JoAnn Henderson, ECS, Director, National Center for Learning and Citizenship, at 303.299.3636 or [jhenderson@ecs.org](mailto:jhenderson@ecs.org).



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