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Fact Sheets

Why Districts, Schools, and Classrooms Should Practice Service-Learning

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Service-learning should be practiced in schools because it yields so many simultaneous benefits. It is what many educators consider a "value-added" approach because it helps multiple participants from schools and communities and has multiple benefits for each. This fact sheet highlights some key reasons why districts, schools and classrooms should practice servicelearning.

Service-learning leads to student engagement and incorporates research on effective instruction

Research shows that students who participate in high quality service-learning experiences typically become more engaged in learning as shown by increased attendance and motivation to learn. This is because service-learning incorporates much of what is known about effective instruction. Service-learning is an interesting and meaningful activity that relevant to students' lives and involves cognitive, social, and affective components of learning. It provides an opportunity for every student to be successful and it helps students learn how to transfer the knowledge and skills they acquire into real life settings.

Service-learning can help students to improve academically

Research shows that when service-learning is designed in particular ways, students show gains on measures of academic achievement, including standardized tests. The academic benefits of service-learning come when teachers explicitly tie service activities to standards and learning objectives, and when they design instruction that maximizes learning. For example, servicelearning that involves tutoring typically results in learning for both of the individuals who participate, and many studies show that the tutor actually learns as much if not more than the person being tutored. Service-learning that includes environmental activities often yields student gains in the content areas of math (e.g., measurement and problem solving) and science (e.g. prediction and knowledge of botany) if these knowledge and skill areas are explicitly woven into the experience. The academic gains come because students have greater opportunity to explore, engage in dialogue for understanding, and become more engrossed in the tasks.

Service-learning helps students improve higher order thinking skills

In addition to acquisition of core knowledge and skills, some researchers found that many service-learning tasks help students to improve higher order thinking skills such as analysis, problem solving, decision-making, cognitive complexity, and inferential comprehension because they are exposed to relevant tasks that require them to use these types of skills. This benefit can be realized if teachers play an active role in facilitating dialogue and understanding of more complex tasks. For example, if students are providing service to the homeless, they are more likely to improve higher order skills if teachers facilitate a discussion of the roots of homelessness and its economic costs and benefits. If students are working with seniors, designing instruction that promotes dialogue about history and seniors' experiences with war and peace, for example, helps students learn about the relations between personality and social/economic/political forces.

Service-learning fosters the development of important personal and social skills for young people

Studies show that service-learning has strong effects on several areas related to character, reduction of risk behaviors, and promoting an ethic of service. Service-learning, for example, has been shown to promotes responsibility, trustworthiness, and caring for others - all of which are positive character traits. Character development occurs because students are often given responsibility for outcomes in service-learning settings and are more likely to engage in interdependent tasks and joint productive activity. They learn not to let each other down or to disappoint those being served. They also often develop bonds with adults other than parents and teachers, providing them with another source of guidance that they occasionally use for advice.

Many studies show that young people who engage in service-learning are less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as smoking, unprotected sexual relationships, and drug use. One researcher who conducted an examination of all of the programs associated with reduction of teenage pregnancy found that participation in service-learning was associated with fewer teenage pregnancies than any other practice at the high school level. While it is not clear why this is the case, researchers speculate that service-learning both provides something to do especially during after school hours, and gives students exposure to alternative career pathways to pursue. Young people who participate in service-learning are also more likely to acquire an ethic of service and to continue volunteer work as they get older.

Service-learning helps young people develop stronger ties to their schools, communities, and society

Most service-learning activities help bond students to school because they become more motivated to learn. Service-learning can also establish a sense of civic responsibility to the school, community, and society. For example, students who help neighbors participate in the census learn why it is important that every citizen be counted. Students who help with voter registration learn about how democracy works. Students' civic engagement and responsibility is more likely to occur when teachers provide instruction that helps students see the explicit link between their activities and governance or other social or political institutions.

Young people who engage in service-learning often come to believe that they can make a difference in their schools, communities, and society. They participate in service activities that often have an observable outcome, and they experience personal efficacy. For many young people, service-learning provides one of the few venues where they can participate and be successful on a regular basis. This experience can be empowering in a very positive way, showing that prosocial contributions are the best pathway to success.

Service-learning promotes exploration of various career pathways

Through their service-learning experiences, many students come into contact with adults in careers that would otherwise remain hidden to them. For example, students may meet social workers, architects, a variety of service workers, scientists, park rangers, government workers, and others who work in community agencies during their service experience. This is the first time many young people are exposed to individuals in these types of careers. This exposure, in turn, can translate into higher or more varied career or job aspirations.

Service-learning is associated with positive school environments

Service-learning is currently practiced in about a third of all public K-12 schools in the United States. Studies of schools in which service-learning is practiced schoolwide show that servicelearning at many sites has served to reinvigorate teachers, stimulate dialogue on teaching and learning, and develop more caring school climates. Many teachers who practice service-learning are often passionate in their support of its practice. These teachers feel that service-learning has changed the way they teach and made learning more fun and productive. An additional benefit of service-learning, documented often in the research, is the reduction of discipline referrals and negative behavioral incidents in schools and classrooms when students are engaged in servicelearning.

Research shows that while initially teachers felt that service-learning was more work for them, over time they believed that the extra work declined significantly and that the benefits outweighed the costs. Particularly as teachers gave increasing responsibility for planning, action, reflection, and assessment to the students, they found that students began to take more ownership, learn more, and become more responsible. When teachers had help from a servicelearning coordinator or from the students themselves, the teachers felt that service-learning was no more time consuming for them than any other instructional activity and that the learning outcomes were better.

Service-learning is associated with more community support for schools

Communities derive many benefits from service-learning. The service activities in which the students engage often are designed to address a specific community problem or meet a particular need, and often serve to build the capacity of the community organization. Community members who interact with the young people frequently say that they change their perceptions of youth, seeing them as assets and resources that contribute to the community in positive ways. There are also a number of cases where service-learning was directly associated with more support for the school in the form of increased number of school volunteers and passage of tax levies in support of schools.

Most of the benefits of service-learning described here do not come about without explicit attention to service-learning design and implementation. In particular, the quality of the reflection activities and their connection with explicit learning goals tied to standards, the skills of the teachers in facilitating understanding, and the degree to which students are given choices in planning, implementing, and assessing their learning are most highly associated with beneficial outcomes.

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