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Service-Learning Now- An Education Reform Strategy with Staying Power

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Youth deserve to have their voices heard. They have important perspectives on the most contentious issues facing our society today. What does authentic engagement of youth look like? For example, Minneapolis Public Schools Community Education is leading the way with *Shine On! Young Leaders Rising*, a student-driven, student-led publication that provides a public forum on which students can engage in a dialogue about how issues impact them. The publication is a powerful and multifaceted tool that features articles that educates youth on issues related to the achievement gap, shares perspectives on personal experiences, and proposes solutions. Once completed, the paper is distributed throughout the district and city to youth, teachers, and staff. This is service-learning in action.

Service-learning has been a part of the progressive education movement for more than 30 years. In 2008, it solidified a substantial evidence base with publication of *The K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice*, (NYLC, 2008) building on education and youth development research that emphasizes the importance of the intensity and duration of an intervention, reflection, youth voice, community involvement, and youth/adult partnerships.

According to the most recent survey, approximately 24 percent of elementary, middle, and high schools have...
integrated service-learning into the curricula (Spring, et. al. 2009). The rates at colleges and universities are even higher, with approximately 25 percent of all institutions of higher education as members of Campus Compact (Campus Compact, 2012) and 60 percent of all community colleges offering service-learning (AACC, 2012).

Many school leaders have adopted service-learning as a school- or district-wide strategy to improve student success, and—when coupled with administrative leadership and professional development—they are demonstrating that it can be taken to scale.

From Charity to Justice

Recent developments in service-learning make the practice particularly suited to addressing current crises in American education: student disengagement, an emphasis on teaching for testing rather than for understanding, and curricula that lack relevance.

As an inquiry-based approach to learning, service-learning has long been known to improve engagement among students and teachers alike. But, while earlier understandings of engagement were rooted in concepts of educational competence, completion of homework, and realization of educational goals (Weiler, et. al, 1998), more recent research has focused on school engagement as a key deterrent in students dropping out.

According to youth development researchers Shawn Ginwright and Taj James, this sort of engagement builds on students’ senses of identity and recognition of “how institutional, historical, and systemic forces limit and promote opportunities for particular groups that lead to collective action to change unjust social conditions” (2002). Drawing from the work of such seminal educators as the Brazilian Paulo Freire, they emphasize the importance of increasing “critical consciousness” that can lead to youth organizing on topics of relevance to them—curfew laws, diverse curricula, waste-dumping, to name a few (Ginwright & James, 2002).

Service-learning moves to this intersection with civic engagement as students grow in their awareness of themselves as actors in a public sphere, and in their capacity to address
systemic problems. Equally important, such youth activism results in “better public policy, more relevant services, and healthier communities” (Ginwright & James, 2002).

**Service-Learning and the Common Core State Standards**

Not only can service-learning guide students to addressing the root causes underlying inequities in education, it can also provide practice in the skills of civic engagement, such as critical thinking, researching, organizing, problem-solving, writing, and speaking. These are the very skills highlighted in the cross-disciplinary Common Core State Standards, grounded in English Language Arts and mathematics, and now adopted by 46 states.

One of the most common service-learning strategies is cross-age tutoring, which helps improve grade-level academic performance in younger students while reinforcing the skills of the older student tutors. But how often is such an experience used as the basis for a deeper exploration of the issues underlying the achievement gap?

If tutors went beyond the first-hand experience of working with younger students to also review editorials on the achievement gap or education reform, they would start tying practice to theory as a part of the research phase of a service-learning experience. And this linkage would address the middle school reading standards on informational texts: “Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author acknowledges and responds to conflicting evidence or viewpoints.” (Common, 2012).

As students work toward a presentation of their experiences as part of the service-learning process, another standard becomes relevant: “Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using different mediums (e.g., print or digital text, video, multimedia) to present a particular topic or idea” (Common, 2012). If students write opinion pieces on the efficacy of their tutoring experiences for the local newspaper, *Shine On! Young Leaders Rising* for example, they would demonstrate, “the ability to write logical arguments
based on substantive claims, sound reasoning, and relevant evidence” (Common, 2012).

Such an integrated approach to the curriculum, with cycles of hands-on practice, research, reflection, analysis, and presentation not only re-engages students in their own learning but also leads to a more informed citizenry.

**District-Wide Adoption**

Despite the relevance and timeliness of service-learning to a range of current education needs, many perceive service-learning as a peripheral strategy employed mainly by a small cohort of dedicated teachers and young people. They point to its complexity as a reason that it will never be considered a mainstream instructional method in every teacher’s repertoire.

Perhaps a part of the solution lies in greater integration across entire school districts. In the past decade, reformers often bypassed district leaders to target schools or teachers with initiatives. Educators now recognize that “District-wide improvements in teaching and learning [generally do not occur] without substantial engagement by their central offices.” (Honig, et al. 2010).

NYLC has had extensive experience supporting school districts moving to broader integration of service-learning—from early efforts in the 1990s in Minneapolis and Chicago, to more recent work with Guilford County Schools in North Carolina.

In this 71,000-student district, NYLC has been working with district staff, teachers, and youth since 2009 to help improve academic outcomes and student behaviors through an integration of service-learning and character education. The initiative includes many components including training district service-learning coaches, service-learning teacher-leaders in every school, teacher curriculum writers, and high school Student Service-Learning Ambassadors. The district has established a special service-learning diploma to recognize student achievement.

Says Superintendent Maurice (“Mo”) Green, “We wanted to get to a place where all of our young people understand their place in the world and how they can make an impact.”

Guilford County has gone from 11 low-performing schools in 2008, to none last year.

The students who have the advantage of experiencing service-learning integrated across disciplines and grade levels move from engagement to achievement. They have the opportunity to strive for a range of worthy destinations, rather than racing “nowhere.”

Service-learning is an opportunity that should be offered to every student in every district across the country.

For more information, visit [www.nylc.org](http://www.nylc.org).

**References**


