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## Service-Learning Opportunities that include Students with Moderate and Severe Disabilities

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# Service-Learning Opportunities That Include Students With Moderate and Severe Disabilities

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Picture this scenario:

For Young at Heart, a monthly social and recreational event targeted specifically for senior citizens, students with moderate and severe disabilities worked with Key Club members to plan and cook a dinner for seniors, as well as plan the entertainment for the evening. During the event, students helped prepare the meal, served it, and participated in the social activities. After a successful evening, the students wrote letters to local businesses to solicit funding for the next event. Students and their peer partners composed reflections and planned a celebration. Teachers included videotaped reflections and activities into students' alternate portfolios to document their learning.

The article describes the experiences of four high schools in Kentucky that have worked to develop inclusive service-learning activities for students with moderate and severe disabilities and their peers (see box, "What Does the Literature Say?"). The students worked through the Kentucky Peer Service-Learning Project. One of the projects was the Young at Heart program, which we describe in more detail later.

### Implementing a Service-Learning Project

In implementing our service-learning projects, we have used the steps devel-

oped by *Students in Service to America* (2003), with special consideration to the needs and learning characteristics of students with moderate and severe disabilities. *Students in Service to America* described a 10-step process, to which we have added an 11th step, which is to link inclusive service-learning activities to the evidence of learning required for your state's alternate educational assessment under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Amendments of 1997, IDEA '97). We illustrate each step with details of the Young at Heart program, which one of the schools conducted. We also briefly discuss other service-learning projects undertaken by various school districts.

### Step 1: Assess the Resources and Needs of Your Community and School

It is essential that we include all students in locating resources and needs. Students with moderate and severe disabilities rarely have the opportunity to plan their learning activities and how they would like to contribute to their community. Students with disabilities and their peers can jointly talk with civic groups and school organizations.

Another strategy is to consider assisting in an existing service-learning activity in your school or community.

For example, in one of our schools, students with disabilities and peer tutors jointly talked with the school principal, counselors, other students in the school, and school service clubs.

The students with disabilities and peer tutors found out that the school's Key Club was looking for another group to help out with Young at Heart, a monthly social and recreational event targeted specifically for senior citizens. At this monthly event, students planned and cooked a dinner for seniors, as well as planned the entertainment for the evening.

### Step 2: Develop Community Partnerships

Seek out the assistance of community organizations (e.g., churches and nonprofit organizations) in identifying the needs of your community. These organizations can provide direction and consultation to your project. Students with moderate and severe disabilities, in partnership with their typical peers, can meet with these organizations. Such experiences provide valued opportunities to practice communication, social, and problem-solving skills and allows those in the community to perceive students with disabilities in a new light.

In the Young at Heart example, the students not only met with the Key Club

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**Community organizations, like churches and nonprofit agencies, can provide direction and consultation to your project.**  
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members, but also contacted the Center for Senior Citizens each month to let them know the time, date, and theme for each event.

### Step 3: Set Clear Educational Goals and Curriculum

Make sure that targeted service-learning skills are an extension of educational goals and individualized education program (IEP) objectives. Teachers can plan to measure achievement of goals through a variety of strategies, including instructional data on IEP objectives, student journals, peer reflections (written by collaborating peers), and letters by local civic groups or community organizations documenting the students' achievements.

In the Young at Heart example, student IEP objectives included

- Initiating and sustaining social interactions.
- Cooking and meal planning skills.
- Functional math skills (planning a budget, purchasing items, measuring, and counting items for each participant).
- Recreational skills (playing card and other table games).

### Step 4: Choose Project and Begin Planning

During this step, the students and teacher should complete their evaluation of needs, as well as the extent of their own resources. In selecting the service-learning project, teams should consider community and school partnerships (what part will each play?). In addition, the planning teams should think about how the goals of the service-learning activity will be continued after the project is completed.

In the Young at Heart example, students with moderate and severe disabilities were actively involved in each stage of the planning (e.g., identifying the theme for each evening, the menu, and the recreational activities). The teacher and students have already begun planning how this service-learning project can continue beyond the current year.

In subsequent years, the teacher plans to have her students write letters to businesses to see if they can donate

## What Does the Literature Say About Service Learning?

**Definition.** Service learning is a well-recognized strategy for enabling students to integrate and apply the knowledge and skills they learn in school to address significant needs in their schools or communities (Yoder, Retish, & Wade, 1996). Students choose to do activities to benefit their community, within those activities, teachers infuse the academic curriculum and individualized student goals.

What separates service learning from simple volunteer or community service activities is the links to both the curriculum and to the students' reflections on what they have learned as a result of that activity. Service learning is thus directly tied to the academic curriculum, and for students with disabilities, into their individualized education program (IEP) objectives.

**Benefits and Results.** Educators are increasingly recognizing service learning as an important learning tool for all students.

- In a survey of 13 special educators involved in service-learning projects with their students, Brill (1994) found increases in attendance, academic skills, and social relationships with peers for the students with disabilities.
- Yoder et al. (1996) described an inclusive service-learning program between seventh- and eighth-grade students with learning disabilities, students with limited English proficiency (LEP), and general education students. These authors noted several benefits for this heterogeneous group of students, including increased self-esteem, self-knowledge, communication, problem-solving skills, and social skills.
- The Web site for *Students in Service to America* (2003) has identified other benefits, including enhanced

student engagement in school, the opportunity to learn about new careers, and a stronger sense of being part of one's community.

- Little research exists on the use of service learning for students with moderate and severe cognitive disabilities, especially in the context of inclusive learning opportunities with their peers. In one such study, Burns, Storey, and Certo (1999) described an inclusive-learning project that included high school students with severe disabilities and students without disabilities. The peers who participated demonstrated significantly more positive attitudes toward people with severe disabilities than they had before their participation. In contrast, these authors found that high school students who engaged in service activities directed solely to helping students with severe disabilities (e.g., Special Olympics) did not evidence significant changes in attitude.
- Gent and Gurecka (1998) have also discussed the appropriateness of service learning for students with severe disabilities, and the potential benefits of creating more natural peer supports, responsible citizenship, and integrated learning and assessment strategies. These authors have noted that even students with severe disabilities can learn to reflect on the impact of what they have learned.
- A recent study described service learning as a vehicle for authentic community-referenced instruction for all students (Kluth, 2000). The study showed that the project enabled students with disabilities to practice important life skills, while providing students without disabilities opportunities to connect what they learn in class to the real world.

money, supplies, or time to Young at Heart.

### Step 5: Plan Project in Detail

During this step, students should develop a specific action plan and a timeline for completing their project, determine

a project budget, and assign tasks for themselves, as well as work with any community partners to identify the steps or activities the partners will undertake (*Students in Service to America*, 2003). This step provides students with disabilities and their peers

with excellent opportunities to practice time, budgeting, and money management skills and to learn to divide goals into a series of smaller steps or sub-goals.

In the Young at Heart project, students were actively involved in all steps (including the budget) and the teacher carefully considered how each student with a disability could work with a peer.

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**Students with moderate and severe disabilities were actively involved in each stage of the planning (e.g., identifying the theme for each evening, the menu, and the recreational activities).**

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#### **Step 6: Seek Necessary Funding and Resources**

Some service-learning projects may require additional resources. Other school clubs, faculty, students, parents, faith-based organizations, and local businesses may be willing to help, if asked. In our Young at Heart example, the teacher was able to secure a grant from a nonprofit agency for the activity.

#### **Step 7: Implement and Manage the Project**

As students begin their project, teachers should assist them in continuously monitoring their progress. Students with disabilities might even track their own performance on key learning objectives during this step (e.g., a money management skill for a student who has that skill on his or her IEP).

In the Young at Heart program, the students were in charge of decorations, food, and entertainment for each monthly event. For the Thanksgiving event, the students decided to have formal seating for the dinner, with a peer and a student with a disability seated at each table with several senior citizens in order to get to know the seniors better.

One student with a moderate disability, whose IEP objectives included initiating and sustaining interactions, evaluated her own performance on how well she did each time in practicing those skills. She learned not only to initiate interactions, but to even request her favorite tasks each month for Young at Heart.

#### **Step 8: Devise Reflection Activities**

Involve students, on an ongoing basis, in reflecting on what they have achieved and learned. Peers can assist students with moderate and severe disabilities in composing their reflections. Students can also document their learning by taking photographs and videotapes, or through a pictorial or photographic story. They can also integrate digital photographs into a peer service-learning project Web site. Reflections and other documentation of student learning can be excellent additions to student portfolios and can help to promote students'

#### **Peer Tutor Reflection**

"Watching the students with disabilities open up and communicate with other people made me realize how much of a regular life they can live if given the opportunity to do so. I saw students in totally a new light outside of the classroom and outside of the daily math and reading work. They carried on conversations and worked at assisting everyone else just like the peer tutors did.

"Young at Heart not only helped the students with disabilities to interact with their peers and community, but it helped me to realize how incredible these students actually are. I honestly feel that I learned so much more from this experience than they did. I learned exactly how much they have to offer this world and how capable they are of doing things.

"Hopefully this event also helped to impact the community's opinions on students with disabilities. I hope the senior citizens that took part in this experience gained a better understanding for people with disabilities and realized they're people, too."

—Kali Arison, Peer, Hopkins County Central High School

sense of ownership and control over their own learning (Ezell and Klein, 2003).

In the Young at Heart example, both students with disabilities and peer tutors have written reflections about their participation in Young at Heart (see boxes).

#### **Step 9: Assess and Evaluate Your Service-Learning Program**

Teachers can assist students in collecting data on their own performance. Teachers and students can also conduct interviews with others (community organization, service recipients, and other teachers) to evaluate the effect of their service-learning activity.

For example, one strategy for evaluating the success of Young at Heart would be to survey the senior citizens about their participation at the end of the year. Such a survey would give students further opportunities for practice on IEP skills (e.g., initiating and sustaining interactions, calculating and charting the number of participants who reported that they had enjoyed the monthly activities).

#### **Step 10: Celebrate Students' Achievements**

Celebration is crucial to any service-learning project. For all students involved in the activity, it is a chance to celebrate the results of their work. For students with moderate and severe disabilities, a celebration provides the opportunity to give back to the community and to be recognized for that achievement. Participation in a service-learning project can be a great source of pride and of a sense of one's own competence.

A celebration is also a time for recognizing the contributions of one's partners. In the Young at Heart program, the teacher, students with disabilities, and peer tutors have planned a cookout the last week of school to recognize student achievements and to celebrate their achievements. They will also recognize individual students for their participation in the program with a certificate. As they plan for next year, they are hoping to include even more students in the service-learning project.

**Step 11: Include the Service-Learning Project into Alternate Portfolio Entries, if Applicable**

As we have noted, service-learning activities provide a wonderful source of evidence for student portfolios. In several states, that evidence can be used to document

- The achievement of targeted IEP objectives.
- Generalized performance across school and community settings.
- The student's ability to work toward a group goal with peers.
- Opportunities to explore a potential career option.

Portfolio evidence can include journal entries and other self-reflections, photographs, student instructional performance data, peer reflections about the student's work, and letters from participating community agencies on the success of the project (Kleinert & Kearns, 2001).

In the Young at Heart example, students with moderate and severe disabilities have had their reflections included in their alternate assessment portfolios, along with evidence of achieving their targeted skills. Peers have included their own reflections as one of the required writing pieces in Kentucky's writing portfolio required for graduation.

Young at Heart has been so successful that the students with moderate and severe disabilities and peers have decided to start their own service-learning club, *Together as Peers*, and have designed a shirt for their club with "Together as Peers" on the front and the signatures of all the club members on the back of each shirt. The club motto is "Attitudes Are the Real Disabilities." The club now has 67 members, with students with disabilities and peers paired for each office (e.g., President, Vice-President). Each student member has to have 6 service-learning hours, and officers must complete 9 hours.

**Other Examples of Service-Learning Projects**

The following are other examples of service-learning projects across our participating schools.

**Care Packages**

Students collected nonperishable supplies for care packages for soldiers stationed overseas, and especially in war-torn areas. Students had to identify

**Reflections From Students With Disabilities**

"We decorated the cafeteria and had a meal for them (Senior Citizens) and I sang for the Young at Heart. There was about 40 senior citizens there."  
 "We wanted to help people in need."  
 "We learned about service."  
 "It was a lot of fun to help others."

recently graduated, former students from their school who were serving overseas, determine an overall budget for their project (including the approximate cost of care packages and postage); what they could send that the soldiers would need, collect or purchase the supplies, make the care packages and take them to the post office. Students also learned a part of the history of the region in which the men and women were serving (e.g., Iraq), learned about the origins of the conflict, and followed the progress of our soldiers' efforts.

One school raised money for this project by conducting a bake sale that was promoted by the local Wal-Mart; students had to bake and sell the items, while learning targeted IEP objectives in measuring, following directions, counting money, working in a group and on interpersonal skills.

In purchasing the items for the care packages, the students had to select the best buys for their money, learning valuable lessons in consumerism. One school also included teddy bears in care packages, so soldiers could give the bears to Iraqi children.

**Community Health**

Students helped to plan a Community Health Fair. One of our schools has a Sports Medicine and Health Department that collaborates with a local hospital. Several of the students with disabilities take Sports Medicine classes. Together with their peers, they are planning a

spring Community Health Fair open to the public.

The fair will include free blood pressure and cholesterol checks, information about preventative health care and common diseases that are especially prevalent in Kentucky (e.g., diabetes, heart disease), as well as women's and children's health issues. Students are responsible for working together to obtain the health care workers for each booth, and in the process, are learning important elements of living healthy lives themselves.

Students participating in the state alternate assessment will be able to include this activity as an important part of their Health entry for their required portfolios. These entries will document the state learner standards of "Students demonstrate the skills that they need to remain physically healthy and to accept responsibility for their own physical well-being" and "Students demonstrate the skills to evaluate and use services and resources available in their community."

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***Service-learning projects provide opportunities for students to practice time, budgeting, and money management skills and to learn to divide goals into a series of smaller steps.***  
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**Reading Program**

Students created children's books and read those books to preschool and primary-age students. Together, students with moderate and severe disabilities and peers at three of our schools have created story books and story boards (illustrations) of children's books to read to preschool and primary-age children. Not only does this activity increase valued literacy skills for students with disabilities, but it also provides these students an added opportunity to practice those skills with stu-

dents just beginning reading instruction.

Targeted skills incorporated into this service-learning activity included increased oral communication skills, sight word vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing in complete sentences.

#### **Toy Drive**

Students conducted a drive to collect used toys in good condition to package and distribute to local facilities for Christmas. The students and peers decided where the toys would go. This activity was done as a whole-school project (i.e., all students were invited to participate), to increase the number of toys brought in.

The students also held a Christmas craft sale to raise the funds needed to package and wrap the gifts, purchase batteries, and buy other accessories. During the craft sale, the students worked on IEP objectives for measuring, completion of task, following directions, handling money and making change, salesmanship, and detail to the craftsmanship of the items they were making.

#### **Recycling**

Students held a schoolwide recycling project in collaboration with the School Ecology Club and with a unit on recycling that was part of Earth Science class. Students learned to weigh and calculate the amount of usable recyclables collected each week, as well as the difference between hazardous and safe materials.

Students had to do research in the library on what could be recycled, and they had to take home a survey and interview neighbors and relatives on whether they recycled, and why they did or did not do so.

#### **Meals on Wheels**

A student with a moderate to severe disability and a peer were paired for this activity. Together, they counted out what was needed for each meal (meals, utensils, drinks, desserts, etc.), and delivered the meals with staff supervision on their prescribed route. The student with a disability worked on critical

### **Teacher and Parent Reflections on Service Learning**

#### **Teacher Reflection**

"The only thing I would do different is start sooner. I have been depriving my students by not giving them a way to give back to their community and feeling they have value. This project has built confidence and self-esteem for students with and without disabilities. Service learning has helped me to remember why I am a teacher!"—*Virginia McGregor, Teacher, Hopkins County Central High School*

#### **Parent Reflection**

"Service learning helps students with disabilities learn about helping others. Students with disabilities often receive a great deal of help. It is so wonderful for them to help someone else. It has given Karli a great sense of awareness about how she can help others in need. This project also provided opportunities where Karli could feel that she was doing something important. I can see how gratifying it is for Karli to help someone else and make someone smile."—*Lori Edds, Parent*

communication skills (greeting each person and engaging in social conversations) and on targeted IEP math skills related to counting and addition. After graduating, the student with a disability found paid employment in a similar job delivering ink cartridges to businesses.

#### **Clothing Drive**

Students conducted a clothing drive for a garage sale to benefit Habitat for Humanity. Students were responsible for collecting, sorting, cleaning, and packing the clothes, in preparation for the Habitat for Humanity Garage Sale.

As a follow-up activity for Habitat for Humanity, students are working to construct a storage shed to house the tools used in building a Habitat house. When the house is completed, the tool shed will remain as a storage shed for the new home owners. Student learning objectives included independent living skills, math skills (measurement), and working in a group to accomplish an overall goal.

#### **Children's Hospital**

Students collected toys, books, and money for children served by the local Hospice program. Money collected was used to purchase books; students used their own knowledge of favorite children's books to make their choices. Students worked on money management (counting money, purchasing within a budget), as well as reading skills in selecting appropriate books.

#### **Pledges for a Benefit**

Students raised pledge money and volunteered at the local Down Syndrome Buddy Walk, to benefit children and adults with Down syndrome (two schools participated in this project).

#### **Benefits of Service Learning for Students With Moderate and Severe Disabilities**

Service learning provides students with moderate and severe disabilities the opportunity to give back to their communities. Too often, educators and other service providers view these students only as the recipients of services (Brill, 1994), be it through such formal services as special education, vocational rehabilitation, related services or through more informal supports, such as peer tutoring.

In addition to the benefits reported in the literature for students with and without mild disabilities (e.g., increased self-esteem, problem-solving skills, social skills), we have found that service-learning opportunities for students with moderate and severe disabilities have led to improved attitudes of peers about these students' true capabilities.

We have also found that inclusive service-learning activities allow students with disabilities who are participating in their state's alternate assessment to document increased evidence of generalization of targeted skills across multiple settings, increased use of natural supports, and document higher levels of self-direction and self-determination. Direct evidence of targeted skills, the generalization of those targeted skills, natural supports, and measures of self-determination are currently included within the scoring rubric of several states' alternate educational

assessments under IDEA '97 (Browder et al., in press; Kleinert, Green, Hurte, Clayton & Oettinger, 2002). Thus service learning can provide students with an important vehicle for demonstrating what they know and are able to do.

### **Incorporating Student Projects into Alternate Assessments**

Students have included their service-learning projects into our state's alternate assessment in a variety of ways, as follows:

- Service-learning projects provide excellent vehicles for students to demonstrate their learning in targeted skills in such general curriculum areas as Science (the ecology service project noted previously) and Health (the Community Health Fair project noted previously). Math skills have included purchasing, choosing the best buys (comparative shopping), managing a budget, and measurement skills. Language arts skills have been incorporated through the students' own reflections on service learning, and through writing and adapting stories for young children. Targeted skills in these and related areas are included in most states' alternate assessments (Browder et al., in press), and content from the areas of Reading, Math, and Science are now a requirement for alternate assessments under No Child Left Behind.
- Through service learning, students are able to show that they can apply what they have learned in the classroom to other settings throughout their school and community. A number of states have included measures of generalization and multiple settings as part of their scoring rubrics for alternate assessments (Browder et al., in press).
- Service learning allows students to document sustained social interaction and cooperative group skills, also measured in several states' alternate assessments. Kentucky, as well as several other states, includes a measure of a student's network of social relationships as a part of its alternate assessment. Service-learning projects such as Young at Heart, in which stu-

dents with and without disabilities are actively engaged with senior citizens and others in the community, provides vivid examples of such social networks.

- Service learning provides excellent ways for students to demonstrate such skills as planning a project and monitoring and evaluating its success. Choosing, planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's performance are all essential components of self-determination (Agran, King-Sears, Wehmeyer, & Copeland, 2003), an educational outcome that researchers have shown to be directly related to post-school success (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003).

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### **Peer, Student, Teacher, and Parent Reflections**

We collected reflections by a peer and reflections by students with disabilities about their service-learning projects, respectively (see boxes). We also noted perspectives from a teacher and a parent. In our interviews at participating schools, we found that administrators, general and special educators, students with and without disabilities, and parents of students with and without disabilities saw positive effects from these students' involvement with service learning.

For example, one administrator noted that, as a result of his school's peer tutoring and service-learning program, "students seem more enthusiastic about their school work and responsibilities and accomplishing the tasks and also the goals that they have during their high school years."

A parent of a participating peer at another of our schools echoed that theme:

He's found a purpose in life and a goal to reach. It seemed like he was just running and didn't know what he wanted to do... But it seems like he has finally found something that he has found satisfaction and enjoyment out of at the same time.

Clearly the benefits of these programs go both ways—for students with and without disabilities!

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