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Democratic Service Learning

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TALK IT UP

ADVOCATING FOR SERVICE-LEARNING

EDITION TEN: FEBRUARY 2005

Through the Talk It Up series, Partnership members share tips with one another about advocating effectively for service-learning. To read earlier issues, go to <http://www.service-learningpartnership.org/publications>.

DEMOCRATIC SERVICE-LEARNING

By Dr. Lew Allen and Dr. Kathy Thompson

The ultimate purpose of American public education is to help students learn how to be compassionate, problem-solving citizens in a democratic society. It is the job of schools to help each generation envision a better future and acquire the dispositions, skills, and experiences to make this vision a reality. Our youngest citizens need a democratic education, for which service-learning is an indispensable element.

Improving democratic education is the mission of the League of Professional Schools. Founded by Dr. Carl Glickman in 1989, the League promotes the school as a student-oriented democratic learning community focused on improving teaching and learning for all.

The League's school-university collaboration has, over the past 16 years, involved 150 member schools in Georgia and over 40 faculty members at the University of Georgia. We have positive evaluation results of our impact on students, teachers, and schools, and we have learned what structures and procedures allow teachers, students, parents, and community members to work in concert on making democratic education a reality.

In recent years, we have intensified our focus on democratic learning, which supports all students in developing

the academic and social skills, problem-solving abilities, and civic attitudes that equip them to work for a better democratic life for all. The following five principles, adopted from the work of Dr. Glickman, help define democratic learning:

1. Students work actively with problems, ideas, materials, and people as they learn skills and content.
2. Students have escalating degrees of choice within the parameters provided by teachers.
3. Students contribute to their community through their learning.
4. Students demonstrate their learning in public settings and receive public feedback.
5. Students are assessed according to high academic standards.

These principles also describe sound service-learning practice. Indeed, when service-learning teachers use all of them, the result is democratic service-learning.

We believe that democratic service-learning should be at the heart of American public education. We hope you will advocate for schools to embrace democratic service-learning by focusing on the following three areas of change simultaneously.

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1 Ensure a shared understanding of democratic service-learning. Democratic service-learning is not an add-on for schools. It is essential to high-quality, democratic schooling. Stakeholders—teachers, students, administrators, parents, and community members—must understand how democratic service-learning supports powerful academic learning for students and the public purpose of schooling. These stakeholders need information, time for dialogue about the philosophical beliefs and research base that underpin democratic service-learning, and multiple opportunities to talk in small groups about their concerns, questions, hopes, and fears. They will have to change some of their teaching and/or thinking about teaching. For this to happen, they must continue to learn, reflect, experiment, and support one another.

We believe that democratic service-learning should be at the heart of American public education.

2 Align the school's mission and governance with democratic service-learning. Stakeholders will need to collectively study their school's mission. Nearly all schools have guiding statements that call for students to become life-long learners, problem-solvers, critical thinkers, and participating citizens. Democratic service-learning fosters all these results, but traditional classroom-bound instruction often does not. Stakeholders will want to rewrite the

mission statement so that it clearly supports democratic service-learning as core to a school's mission. Similarly, the school's governance structures and processes should reflect the school-wide commitment to democratic service-learning. Decision-making must involve all stakeholders in working and thinking together to translate the school's mission into individual and collective action. A top-down, bureaucratic way of making decisions is not compatible with democratic schooling. Free exchange of thoughts and lessons-learned must inform decision-making about every aspect of school life.

3 Use research to review and improve your efforts. Stakeholders must create structures and procedures to collect, analyze, interpret, and take action on data that will inform their decisions about implementing democratic service-learning. Everyone, including teachers, principals, school boards, district administrators, community groups, and parents, needs good information to guide his or her actions.

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Attending to these strategies for change will create an ongoing learning cycle for advocates working to place democratic service-learning at the center of their school's instructional practices and curricular choices. Schools successful in doing this honor the true public purpose of American schools.

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For more information and materials for promoting, supporting, and sustaining democratic service-learning, contact Kathy Thompson at kthompso@coe.uga.edu or visit the Partnership web site at www.service-learningpartnership.org.