Project Summaries

Service Learning and Community Engagement Examples

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Colorado Department of Education Service-Learning: Evaluation Report

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Evaluation Report

COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION SERVICE-LEARNING

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Executive Summary

In 2001, the state of Colorado received three federal grants to provide service-learning opportunities for students. Service-Learning Colorado at the Colorado Department of Education, in turn, distributed funds to a total 27 grantees. There were three types of grantees: Community, Higher Education, School Partnership (CHESP), School- or District-Based grantees, and Community-Based grantees.

During the 2001-2002 school year, over 10,000 students participated in service-learning that was supported by a Service-Learning Colorado grant. These students provided over 153,000 hours of service. Over half of the grantees reported that K-12 students, the environment, the general public, at risk youth, senior citizens, and economically disadvantaged persons were the beneficiaries of the service-learning supported by their grant. Nearly half of the grantees worked in rural settings. Over one-fourth worked in urban settings. The remainder of the grantees worked in suburban settings or some combination of settings.

Focus Group Results

Qualitative data were collected and analyzed to address grantees' progress toward meeting the goals and objectives outlined by Service-Learning Colorado. These goals included increasing the reach and improving the quality of service-learning programs, increasing the impacts on K-12 participants, and strengthening communities through youth councils and community partnerships. Qualitative data were also compiled for facilitators to program progress and challenges grantees faced.

Strategies Employed by Grantees to Meet Their Goals

Increasing the Reach of Service-Learning

Grantees employed several strategies to increase the reach of service-learning. These included:

- Building strong partnerships within the school and community;
- Involving youth in outreach activities;
- Building on previous projects and experience;
- Publicizing service-learning in the school and community; and
- Providing professional development activities and teacher trainings.

Increasing the Quality of Service-Learning

Several of the same strategies that were used to increase the reach of service-learning were also cited as useful in helping programs improve the depth and quality of service-learning. For example, the most frequently mentioned strategy to improve the depth and quality of service-learning was providing professional development. Other strategies were mentioned as well, including leveraging funds and providing ongoing support to teachers.

Grantees also discussed strategies they used to connect service-learning to standards. The primary strategy mentioned by grantees was through one-on-one contact with teachers and

schools to provide teachers with specialized instruction on ways to connect their projects to standards.

Impacts on Students

Respondents mentioned numerous examples of impacts on youths' engagement in school. Several respondents noted dramatic improvements in grades and attendance and drops in discipline referrals. Grantees also noted that they felt they were reaching at risk and non-traditional students. Many grantees felt that service-learning was having an impact on students' motivation, mentioning that they had witnessed increases in students' excitement and enthusiasm in school. Finally, grantees commented on the sense of empowerment students felt when they had a high level of ownership of their projects.

Respondents also identified impacts of service-learning on students' engagement in civic and community life. Grantees reported that exposure to community agencies and volunteer opportunities led to increased involvement in the community by students after their service-learning experiences were over.

Facilitators and Challenges

Grantees mentioned several factors that served to facilitate their progress as well as several challenges they faced. Facilitators included:

- Financial support;
- The role of youth in service-learning programs;
- Supportive administrators and teachers; and
- Certain aspects of the Service-Learning Colorado grant process.

Challenges included:

- Time;
- Morale issues;
- Pressure within the school culture to stay focused on standards and the Colorado Standards Assessment Program (CSAP);
- Not enough value placed on the non-academic benefits of service-learning, logistical issues; and
- Staff turnover.

Lessons Learned

Grantees shared several lessons that they learned.

- **Youth are a powerful resource and should be involved in many ways.** Grantees cited youth as helping increase the reach and quality of service-learning at their sites, as well as providing teacher training and being advocates of service-learning in the community.

- **Enthusiasm is contagious and service-learning is not necessarily a "hard sell."** Teachers can become motivated by student success, teachers can get other teachers excited, and students can get other students excited.

- **Personnel are important.** The coordinators, staff, and Volunteers In Service To America (VISTA) were all seen as important parts of grantees' work. They are key to communication, and consistency in staff is very important.

- **Do not put too many restrictions on the use of funds.** This allows visioning to occur at the community level, creating more momentum, understanding, and support for service-learning.

- **Keep the focus on student learning, not standardized testing.** Low-performing schools, that some participants believe benefit the most from service-learning, may be hesitant to try service-learning because of their high-stakes testing climate. Some respondents suggested waiting until CSAP testing was over before approaching new schools.

Survey Results

The quantitative portion of the evaluation was designed to examine the impact of participation in service-learning on students' school and community engagement, and the impact of the *quality* of service-learning on students' school and community engagement and students' views of their service-learning experiences. Analyses were conducted separately for older and younger students.

Analyses were conducted to test for differences between service-learning and comparison students on a variety of outcomes. For younger students, there were no statistically significant differences between service-learning and comparison students on the outcomes examined in this evaluation. However, two statistically significant differences were noted for older students.

- Students who participated in service-learning reported a greater sense of connection to the school community than those who did not participate in service-learning, after controlling for gender, prior experience with service, and pre-test connection to the school community.

- Students who participated in service-learning reported a greater sense of connection to the community than those who did not participate in service-learning, after controlling for gender, prior experience with service, and pre-test connection to the community.

A second set of analyses was conducted to examine the association between quality of service-learning and a variety of outcomes. For younger students, there were no statistically significant results. However, for older students, several statistically significant relationships emerged.

- Students who participated in higher quality service-learning tended to be more behaviorally engaged in school than their counterparts who participated in lower quality service-learning.

- Students who participated in higher quality service-learning reported a greater connection to the school community than their counterparts who participated in lower quality service-learning.

- Students who participated in higher quality service-learning reported a greater connection to their communities than their counterparts who participated in lower quality service-learning.

- Students who participated in higher quality service-learning reported being more behaviorally engaged in their service-learning projects than students who participated in lower quality service-learning.

Recommendations

- **Communicate effective strategies among grantees.** Some grantees mentioned strategies that they found particularly effective. It may be useful to share those strategies with other grantees.

- **Identify ways to facilitate communication among grantees.** Technology could be used to bridge the geographical distance between grantees. For example, Web-based bulletin boards or e-mail discussion lists could be used for communication within sites.

- **Work with teachers to make more intentional connections to civic competencies.** Service-learning research shows that civic outcomes are much more likely when service-learning projects deliberately address civic knowledge and skills either through instruction or reflection.

Addendum: Student Outcomes Results

Grantees also gathered other student performance data, including attendance, discipline referrals, grade-point average (GPA), and Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) scores for the service-learning and comparison classrooms. Fifteen of the 27 grantees gathered this data.

No statistically significant differences between the service-learning group and the comparison group were found in the pattern of student absences and discipline referrals. However, impacts were found along several other academic indicators. Results showed:

- Students who participated in service-learning reported higher GPAs than comparison students;

- Students who participated in service-learning increased their GPAs over time; the comparison students' GPAs decreased over time.

- A larger percentage of students who participated in service-learning scored advanced or proficient on CSAP compared to non-participating students in reading (79.1% vs. 41.6%), writing (48.6% vs. 41.6%), and math (52.3% vs. 38.2%).