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### Md. Service Learning: Classroom Link Weak?

By Michelle Galley  
*Education Week*

Maryland students are mucking out horse stalls, dancing in ballets, answering telephones, and ladling soup for the homeless in order to graduate from high school.

Eleven years after the legislature passed a first-of-its-kind state law requiring all public school students to complete 75 hours of service learning, young people are fulfilling the requirement with varying degrees of success.

Proponents of service learning maintain that regardless of how routine a task may seem, young men and women are still gaining valuable skills and performing needed services in the community.

But service-learning experts argue that regardless of how noble, mundane, or seemingly irrelevant a task may be, it does not qualify as service learning unless it is directly connected to what the student has recently learned.

"What we are talking about is something that is very purposeful in design and is connected to the classroom," said Susan Vermeer, a policy analyst with the National Center for Learning and Citizenship, an arm of the Denver-based Education Commission of the States.

Advocates say an example of "true" service learning would look like this: A civics class completes a unit on homelessness that includes discussion of government policies, mental-health issues, and solutions to the problem.

Students from the class then spend time in a homeless shelter meeting people who are grappling with the issues addressed in the lesson.

Finally, the students reflect on what they have learned from the experience. They write about their preconceived ideas of homelessness, what they would do if they were in that situation, and how they could work to solve the societal problem.

When all those links are made, students are more engaged in school, score higher on tests, feel as if they can make a difference in the world, and retain what they've learned, according to Shelley Billig, a researcher at RMC Research Corp., a research and consulting firm in Portsmouth, N.H.

"Quality makes a huge difference," she said. When students take part in charitable activities that are not embedded in the curriculum, "the learning won't necessarily occur," Ms. Billig said. "You can't leave it to chance."

## An Early Start

Though Maryland is the only state with a service-learning graduation requirement, some districts—including Chicago and Philadelphia—have similar mandates. Each Maryland district decides how students will meet the requirement. Some have fallen more in line with what Ms. Billig would describe as effective service learning.



Damascus High student Whitney Fones, center, earns service learning credit by helping visitors to the Harvest Festival in Derwood, Md., make scarecrows at the Agricultural History Farm Park.  
—Allison Shelley/Education Week

In the 4,500-student Dorchester County schools, service learning is integrated into classroom lessons. "We felt it was the best way to underscore the importance of giving back to your community," said Regina Teat, who coordinates the district's service-learning projects.

For example, Dorchester County's 5th graders participate in a program in which they learn about the problems associated with the overpopulation of pets.

The local humane society visits the students' classrooms, then the students design posters encouraging the public to spay and neuter its cats and dogs. School officials choose one poster each year to turn into a billboard that is located at a major highway running through the rural county.

Service learning in Dorchester County starts in kindergarten. By 9th grade, students have completed their 75-hour graduation requirement, Ms. Teat said.

That way, the district has a better chance "of impacting the character of the children," she said.

The benefits of service learning geared toward younger students could show up in higher test scores as well.

According to new research conducted by Ms. Billig, students in Michigan who participated in service learning performed better on the state assessment than those who did not. She examined the test scores of 1,988 students during the 2001-02 school year. Service-learning was mandatory in three-quarters of those students' classrooms.

Younger students in particular showed more academic gains than did older ones in the study, she said. Service-learning students in grades 3-6 outperformed their peers especially on the writing, social studies, and science portion of the Michigan Educational Assessment Program, Ms. Billig said. Those students took part in service learning, not simply community service, she added.

Unlike in Dorchester County, most Maryland districts combine in-class projects with independent community-based activities in their service-learning programs.

Nevertheless, according to Luke Frazier, the executive director of the Maryland Student Service Alliance, each activity a student performs must incorporate three components: preparation, action, and reflection.

Different students glean different lessons from the service they perform, said Mr. Frazier,

whose organization oversees service-learning programs in the state. For some youngsters, he said, organizing a walk for the homeless "would be a no-brainer." For others, it would prove challenging.

Even filing papers in the office of a nonprofit group provides students with organizational skills and teaches them responsibility, Mr. Frazier said. As with learning in general, he added, students are able to get out of their service projects what they put into them.

Still, the way the program is implemented doesn't sit well with some parents. "It is a hard concept to grasp to tell a child to go volunteer to get your diploma," said Michael C. Franklin, the president of the Parent Teachers Association of Baltimore County.

To make his oldest son's project worthwhile, he sought out a summer program at the Baltimore Zoo that offered zoology classes along with the chance to clean out cages and feed the animals.

The zoo experience was relevant, he said, because his son, who is in the 10th grade, takes part in an environmental-sciences program at his school.

More students should have that caliber of program, in Mr. Franklin's view. "It should be more standardized," he argued.

### **'Life-Changing'**

To help students in the Baltimore area have access to high-quality service-learning projects, the nonprofit Student Service Coalition brokers partnerships between schools and charities.

Linda Federico Kohler, the group's executive director, said the up-close experiences educate students about the causes and effects of the various societal problems they encounter. "They get the picture," she said.

Fifteen-year-old David McDuffie worked in a summer program sponsored by the coalition and helped build a house with Habitat for Humanity, the Americus, Ga.-based organization that brings community volunteers together to construct dwellings along with the soon-to-be homeowners. The work sparked Mr. McDuffie's curiosity in architecture and construction, and the problems associated with poverty.

"Helping one another goes a very long way," said the sophomore at the Boys Latin School of Maryland, a private school in Baltimore that also makes its students undergo service learning.

In contrast, Ms. Kohler said her own daughter performed in a synchronized-swimming show and received credit for it.

"They get into high school, and they have these hours on their report cards, and they don't even know what they have done" to earn them, she said. "Service learning can be life-changing if it is done well."

Yet even synchronized swimming can be service learning, said Steven A. Culbertson, the executive director of Youth Serve America, a national service-learning advocacy organization.

For example, he said, service-learning credit is acceptable if students perform synchronized

swimming for a group of senior citizens after studying such big-picture issues as the isolation of the elderly, the costs of nursing care, and the government role in providing services to the aged.

"There is absolutely nothing wrong with people using their talents in a service environment," Mr. Culbertson said. "The question is, where they are doing it and are they understanding those underlying issues?"

### On the Web

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The [National Center for Learning and Citizenship](#) has published numerous [reports](#) on service learning, including "[Learning That Lasts: How Service-Learning Can Become an Integral Part of Schools, States and Communities.](#)" (Requires [Adobe's Acrobat Reader.](#))

View the transcript of an [online chat on service-learning research](#) with Salley Billig, a researcher at [RMC Research Corp.](#) The chat is hosted by the [National Service-Learning Partnership.](#) (Requires free registration.)

The [National Service-Learning Clearinghouse](#) compiles [resources and tools](#), including [syllabi and curricula.](#)

The [Maryland Student Service Alliance](#) posts the state's service-learning [graduation requirement](#), as well as other resources.

"[Compulsory Service for High School Students: Whose Life Is It, Anyway?](#)" 2000, from the [Ayn Rand Institute](#), asserts that "Mandatory community service for high school students presents a clear moral issue: By what right do we treat our sons and daughters as beasts of burden?"

Boise State University's [service learning site](#) offers [definitions](#) of service learning, as well as [comparisons](#) with other types of student activities.

For an alternative perspective, read "[Service Learning: Hurting Youth and Hurting Our Economy.](#)" from a site called [Pro-Youth Pages.](#)