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Make sure it's service learning, not just community service

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Make sure it's service learning, not just community service. *Leonard T. Burns.*

Abstract: Service learning may be made more beneficial to communities by allowing students to participate aggressively in various learning activities, while keeping them abreast with their own social responsibilities. Students must also be given adequate opportunity to reflect on their service experiences.

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MAKE SURE IT'S SERVICE LEARNING, NOT JUST COMMUNITY SERVICE

By Leonard T. Burns
From Curriculum Report

SERVICE learning, a relatively new instructional strategy in middle and high schools, has existed in various forms for a long time. A structured process, however, has resulted in the evolution of the concept of service learning as an effective instructional strategy. Service learning is an interdisciplinary instructional strategy that facilitates the development of knowledge and skills while helping students understand and accept civic and social responsibility.

For service learning to achieve its greatest potential as an instructional component of the curriculum, a common definition must be adopted. Teachers, school administrators, parents, and business leaders, based on their familiarity with community and public service, typically assume that "community service" and "service learning" have the same meaning. This is not the case.

Community service is generally a service performed by individuals for

the benefit of others, for an organization, and/or for a community. Individuals and/or organizations usually commit their time and energy to a worthy cause without engaging in a structured learning process.

School districts across the nation have added community service as a graduation requirement based on the perception that students need to be socially responsible. The graduation requirement strategy, however, fails

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to link the experience to the curriculum. Without the structure of service learning, mandated community service may become controversial, centering around the use of community service by the judicial system. Consequently, community service may be perceived as punishment for criminal activity.

Service learning, although it may include a community service component, is a structured learning process. The National and Community Service Act of 1990 defines service learning as a method: in which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs; that is integrated into students' academic curriculum or provides structured time for a student to think, talk, or write about what that student did and saw during the service activity; that provides students chances to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities; and that enhances teaching in school by extending student learning into the community and helps foster a sense of caring for others.

Unlike mandated community service, service learning may be more "politically correct" and acceptable within communities, learning environments, and school activity settings. The structured nature of service-learning strategies, connected to an adopted and prescribed curriculum, diminishes the potential of service learning to become a criminal, religious, or other such controversial learning activity. In addition, as many

school systems include in their mission or goal the idea of assisting every learner to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to become a responsible citizen, service learning is compatible with the role of school in our society.

Definition

It is important that each school community build a foundation for service learning that includes a definition of service learning as an instructional activity or strategy: designed to achieve a variety of learning objectives or outcomes outlined in the curriculum; designed to yield outcomes integrated in the context of learning, enabling students to relate and apply their learning to real-life situations; comprising planned activities in which community organizations and students work together to provide a high-quality experience designed to achieve prescribed learning outcomes; comprising activities and/or strategies designed to assist students to develop a sense of civic and social responsibility; and comprising activities or strategies that integrate the adopted curriculum objectives and/or state learner expectations, including outcomes related to reading, writing, listening, speaking, researching, problem solving, critical thinking, assessment, and evaluation.

Development and acceptance of a definition of service learning should be followed by development and implementation of a curricular and instructional planning framework. The Student Service Alliance, (The Alliance), established in 1988 by the

Maryland Department of Education to facilitate development of service-learning programs, has become a viable model for service learning throughout the United States. The Alliance advocates a planning cycle that includes preparation, action, and reflection. The Kentucky Learn and Serve Project planning model includes preparation, meaningful service, structured reflection, and recognition/celebration. The National Association of Secondary School Principals, Department of Student Activities, and Quest International Foundation advocate four steps for service learning: preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration.

The four components common to these models—preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration/recognition—are a solid foundation to plan and implement instructional service-learning activities or projects:

In the area of preparation: Assess the needs of the community; identify a viable need and learner outcomes; identify the core content (knowledge and skills) of the adopted curriculum (school, school district, and/or state) to be learned through the service-learning unit; identify the civic and/or social responsibility knowledge and/or skills to be learned through the service-learning unit; identify and invite interested community leaders and organizations to become involved; conduct orientation and professional development activities with community leaders and organizations

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about service learning and the instructional strategies to be implemented, assessed, and evaluated; collaboratively plan the instructional unit or project; identify the roles and responsibilities of the school (students, teachers, others), community leaders and organizations, and other involved human services and resources; and orient and prepare the students for assuming their role(s), understanding the learning outcomes, and demonstrating the expected social behaviors.

In the area of action: Facilitate development of the knowledge and skills needed by students to initiate and complete the service-learning project; facilitate student planning, research, problem solving, and evaluation relative to the identified community need; implement the service-learning activity/strategy; continuously assess, and involve students in assessing, achievement and progress; and correct and adjust activities and strategies.

In the area of reflection: Involve students in continuous reflection processes during the planning and implementation phases through writing, speaking, and demonstration activities; facilitate continuous student investigation and research; engage students in assessment and evaluation of the project/unit; connect and link activities so students have the opportunity to understand the meaning and impact of their efforts; reflect, assess, and evaluate; and facilitate the reflec-

tion, assessment, and evaluation by community leaders and organizations.

In the area of demonstration/recognition: Involve students in reporting to peers, faculty, and/or community members; engage students in writing for publications (newspapers, magazines, newsletters, videotaping or live television programs, producing an audiotape or radio program, creating Internet information, publishing a brochure or book); recognize students, teachers, and community members for learning/achievement and accepting social responsibility (complimentary oral and written communications, awarding T-shirts with the community need identified, organizing a project that includes a trip, awarding "I made a difference" label pins, awarding certificates of appreciation, etc.).

Research indicates that effective service-learning programs: engage people in responsible and challenging actions for the common good; provide structured opportunities for people to reflect critically on their service experience; articulate clear service and learning goals for everyone involved; allow for those with needs to define those needs; clarify responsibilities for each person and organization involved; match service providers and service needs through a process that recognizes changing circumstances; expect genuine, active, sustained organizational commitment; include training, supervision, monitoring, support, recognition, and evaluation to meet service and learning goals; insure that the time commitment for service and

learning is flexible, appropriate, and in the best interests of all involved and are committed to program participation by and with diverse populations.

Pitfalls, problems, and barriers are a result of inadequate consideration of any one or more of the aforementioned characteristics of effective service-learning programs. A review of the literature, however, also reported that barriers to effective, successful service-learning programs are both practical and perceptual; practical in that appropriate resources may be unavailable, and perceptual in that some people doubt the value of such programs.

Each school and community will face unique issues, concerns, and logistics that will affect the design and implementation of effective and successful service-learning programs. There is no guarantee that careful planning of a service-learning program will result in a positive experience. Success depends on the careful and thorough planning, implementation, and teamwork of schools and community members.

To summarize, it is imperative, in the planning of service-learning activities, that a common definition, appropriate for each school community, be delineated and accepted. In addition, development and utilization of a structure is necessary for the overall success and improvement of service-learning efforts. Continuous improvement of service learning will ultimately ensure that every student will learn and be a positive contributor to his or her community, state, and country. **ED**