Special Topics, General

Special Topics in Service Learning

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Addressing School Board and Administrative Concerns About Service-Learning

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COMMUNITY SERVICE-LEARNING as a philosophy and a program has been driven at the school level largely by the knowledge, enthusiasm, and commitment of individual teachers. Recently community agencies, politicians and government agencies, professional organizations, and various resource centers around the country have joined in promoting these programs, which help students use service opportunities as a source of significant learning.

At the local level, school boards and district administrators are often the least educated about this effective alternative to traditional schooling. Board members and administrators may not be supportive if they do not understand the concept or if they have misconceptions about how the program will be implemented or conducted.

This article will present some aspects of service-learning which are often of concern to board members and district administrators. We focus here on how to address these concerns and turn them into support for service-learning.

Concern #1:
What does service-learning have to do with a K-12 education?

Boards often see school curriculum as strictly academic learning. If they include extracurricular programs, then they may see service-learning as just another club and not central to a person's education. Teachers need to convince them that service-learning is not a fringe program or less important than the traditional academic programs. For example.

* Point out that service-learning programs have stated outcomes which form the basis for the service-learning curriculum, just as they do for all curricular areas.
* Explain that service-learning can often motivate students to do better work in their other subjects or classes. It can give students a picture of why school is important.
* Explain that service-learning, if tied in with other school subjects or courses, can help students learn more easily because it is experiential learning. Students who have trouble with school when it is abstract and theoretical suddenly can learn when taught in an experiential way, as with service- learning.

Concern #2:
We don't need another course or program added to the curriculum!

Policy-makers are still recovering from the "shopping-mall high school syndrome" and are often resistant to adding another course, especially one which doesn't have an identifiable department. At the elementary level, this concern is expressed as a fear of adding another unit

to the curriculum. Here are some suggestions to deal with these concerns:

- Consider beginning with a service-learning club rather than a course.
- Try to find a specific need in the curriculum which could be addressed by a course in service-learning. For example, perhaps seniors need a culminating social studies course in which they can apply what they have learned in the last four years; create a course called "Senior Seminar" or "Social Problems" in which students work on projects and with groups in the community as a basis for class discussions about the social sciences and solutions to contemporary social issues.
- Try to find a specific group of students who need a course and for whom service-learning would be an ideal vehicle. For example, you may have students who have so many failures they are in danger of dropping out or being retained in grade. You could reasonably argue that a service-learning course for these students might provide a needed source of credit and a sense of success. Or, you may need ~ course for transfer students who enter mid. year without enough transferable courses to carry a full schedule. Rather than sit in stud) hall, these students might benefit from service-learning experience.
- Identify an existing course in which service projects could be done either as a unit or a an assignment. This approach doesn't require' a separate curriculum but does provide opportunity to link the service with learning, if the assignment includes the reflection component

Concern #3:
Why should we give credit for volunteerism?

School boards and administrators are seldom opposed to volunteerism. In fact, many of them are members of service organizations like Rotary and Kiwanis. They may have a belief, however, that volunteerism is an activity that should be its own reward and that students should want to participate out of a desire to help others, not a desire to benefit themselves by earning credits. Here are some possible responses to this concern:

- Don't disagree with them. Instead, begin your first service-learning program as a volunteer dub. Once it gets going, you may find that students are so enthusiastic that they will be able to convince the decision-makers that (1) credit is a way to introduce students to the idea who would not otherwise participate, and (2) a for-credit course will allow for deeper learning and more structured reflection opportunities.
- Point out that many students who would most benefit from a service-learning experience won't become involved without credit. If you can show how a service-learning program will improve self-esteem, make students more responsible citizens, and address other problems demonstrated by at-risk students, you might garner the support you need.
- Explain that service-learning is not the same as volunteerism, as it involves both learning and reflecting upon the learning. Thus, it is reasonable to give credit for an activity which includes these two functions, because they should be part of any activity or course in the curriculum.

Concern #4:
We don't believe in requiring students to do volunteer work.

Some boards of education will not want to endorse a service-learning program because they do not want to force students to volunteer. Often this attitude prevails at the beginning of the process, before they have seen the value of service-learning-demonstrated. Often boards of education or administrators who express this concern are merely mirroring perceived parent opinion. They may be afraid that parents will resist a required program because it would limit their child's choices of electives or after-school activities, because transportation is a problem, or because they see no value to volunteerism or believe it is not the function of the school. Deal with objections to required servicelearning programs with one of the following suggestions:

- The easiest choice is to design a program which is voluntary. Especially if this is your first venture into the world of service-learning, we recommend you begin with voluntary options. Club activities or a separate service-learning club are good examples, since no one can be required to participate in a club. If servicelearning is an activity within a class, let it be one of several choices or, if it is a required activity, be sure students have another class they can take as an alternate. If it is a separate class, let it be an elective class.
- If you are convinced that service-learning, in some form, should be required of all students (or all students in a group; e.g., fifth-graders), always provide an option if parents protest their student's involvement. Some definitely will! Reasonable alternatives include: (1) a research paper on a topic related to social issues, (2) an interview of a person or persons involved in a community agency, (3) a notebook with articles about a specific social issue and the student's commentary on them. The key is to provide an "academic escape valve" for those who object to the experiential or service part of the program. Interestingly, schools which require service-learning but allow some kind of alternative seem to find that very few students avail themselves of it. Students seem to have a natural interest in the kind of experiential learning provided by service-learning. Another option with required programs is to give students a wide range of choice in placements. If students (and parents) can say "yes" or "no" to certain kinds of placements, they will more willingly agree to the required component. Some students will not be able to handle a placement with certain kinds of tasks or a certain environment, or to work with certain kinds of problems or issues. The right placement is crucial to the success of service- learning in your school and will insure that fewer complaints come to the administration and school board.

Concern #5:
Will we have to hire someone to run this program?

The need for additional staffing, especially today in the era of school cut-backs and "doing with less," is an unpleasant prospect for administrators and boards of education. They will wonder who will do the planning and managing of a service-learning program and what it will cost the taxpayer. If this concern is likely to surface, we suggest one of the following options:

- Avoid models of service-learning which require many staff to operate, such as required courses for all grade levels.
- Consider using a volunteer parent or community member, or perhaps even a community agency, to serve as coordinator. This idea is do-able only if the program is fairly small and manageable.

- Spread the tasks of coordination around to more than one person. This option can be tricky, since the coordinators have to coordinate their work, too. But it is an option, unless everyone is already stretched too thin. For example, one person could maintain the database, one could maintain contact with agencies, one could work with students, one could develop policies and procedures, etc.
- Consider letting students help manage portions of the program. For example, students can help identify agencies, can keep some records, and can develop their own assessment criteria.
- If you do need to hire a coordinator, consider a part-time one or one paid with a stipend.
- Calculate the costs in relation to the costs of other programs operated by the school. (It may not be as expensive as you think, especially if students are getting credit and would otherwise be taking another course.)

Concern #6:
We can't afford to offer this program.

Even beyond the concern that a coordinator will need to be hired, school boards are worried about other associated costs. Certain kinds of service-learning programs are typically more expensive. For example, a separate course required of all students which meets during the day and involves district-provided transportation to sites is the most expensive. It requires one-fifth of a teacher for every 30 students, plus the cost of bus transportation. Here are some ideas to consider when cost factors are used to argue against service-learning programs:

- Point out that even the staffing for the most expensive option is no greater than for most academic courses. Only transportation, if provided by the school, is extra and, if used only on a weekly basis, might be affordable.
- Consider starting with a program having low expenses, such as a club activity which can be maintained with a small stipend. You can later expand, when and if the interest is there.
- Consider models in which a teacher is not needed five days a week; i.e., the class does not meet every day. You can cut your costs significantly and still maintain a serious reflection component if students meet only to discuss their ideas and do the service component outside of class. Create placements which do not require a commitment of district resources for transportation. This means that students either will be dismissed early from school to go to their placements or will do their service work after school, on the weekends, or even during the summer months.

Think about how you can structure the reflection activity with less need for staff time. For example, you can have students complete journals of their experience which can be checked for completion. You can have existing staff members (e.g., counselors) conduct periodic small group discussions. In some cases, you could even make the reflection activity the responsibility of the agency.

As previously suggested, include service- learning as a project within an existing class. This model has no additional costs, since the teacher is already paid to teach the class and the service-learning activity is another assignment or project to be graded.

Concern #7:
Can students at this age handle this responsibility?

School boards may worry that students will not be able to appreciate, understand, or engage effectively in service-learning activities. Many people think of volunteer service as an adult activity. There may also be a concern about transportation and how students will get to their placements. Finally, concern may be expressed about whether students can deal with potentially new and challenging activities in a setting very different from school. Here are the suggestions for answering this question:

- Point out that, in reality, service-learning activities have been used in some form in all grade levels. The most popular grades are middle school and high school, however. There is no evidence at all to suggest that age alone determines if students can handle this role.
- Try to structure age~appropriate activities or placements for students. Much of your success in countering this concern depends on the "fit" between the agencies and the students' abilities. Many books are available with ideas for activities for different age groups. Definitely refer to them.

Concern #8:
How will we find enough placements for all the students?

Once they hear your proposal, boards may be concerned about whether or not you will find enough placements for your students. In some areas of the country, rural areas in particular, agencies and service opportunities are not always readily available.

- One option is to place several students in one agency. This option is not always possible, but generally most agencies are willing to take three or four students, if they are asked.
- Another option is to start small and get a small service-learning project off the ground before you begin to expand it to include more students. This option is a good idea whether you are using the service club model or the separate course model.
- A third option is to have students identify a need and then develop a service to address this need. For example, a class might repair appliances for people in a retirement center which is too far away to visit, or they might make toys for a day care center in a nearby city.

Concern #9:
Will you place students in politically controversial settings?

Boards of education and administrators often worry that your program will cause controversy. Some kinds of placements may involve working on social change agendas, in which an agency tries to correct a problem rather than just provide direct service to those who are its victims. Some parents will strongly object to having their children working on what may be perceived as "radical" causes, and it is these complaints that will get to the board of education. On the

other hand, such opportunities help students consider the causes of social problems and how social change to improve conditions might occur. The following ideas may be helpful in addressing this concern:

- One option is to choose not to place students in politically sensitive agencies or in advocacy projects on behalf of such an organization. If all placements are viewed as charity, there will likely be few complaints.
- If you are going to include opportunities for advocacy and social change work, be sure to include opportunities for direct service as well. Again, you are creating options which allow persons of varied ideologies to participate.
- Don't start with the most controversial placements. In fact, stay with more conventional service learning placements (e.g., hospitals, nursing homes, schools, day care centers, tutoring, parks and recreation centers). Use the reflection component to help students see the connection to broader social problems and to discuss possible solutions.

Concern #10:
Won't this program raise our liability and therefore our insurance costs?

Boards of education are charged with wise stewardship of the taxpayers' money, so it's no surprise when this question is asked. Clearly, students who are working on projects in the community which are under the sponsorship of the school are the school's responsibility. This question is about whether service-learning programs are potentially more dangerous than other school programs in terms of lawsuits.

- Since the laws of different states vary considerably, you must contact your school's counsel for information on this issue.
- Contact the National Association of Secondary School Principals. They have developed some helpful information about liability for negligence.
- Advance planning is crucial to addressing this concern. You should establish criteria forscreening the agencies where students will work, including criteria which address both educational benefits and safety concerns. Spend time to develop procedures, policies, job descriptions, emergency phone numbers, and assignment/location charts. The best assurance you can give decision-makers about this fear is that you have done your homework and have a preplanned program which can be managed to protect students from "foreseeable danger."

Consult your school's business official to make sure the district insurance covers the kind of service-learning program you plan to recommend, and observe any restrictions the company may place on your program.

Conclusion

There is a lot of useful information available to those of you who want to start a service-learning program in your school, but the best-laid plans can go nowhere without the support and funding of the school board and administration. Thus, it is crucial that you

understand the concerns you are likely to hear and design the program which best accomplishes your goals and yet addresses these concerns.

Bibliography

For more detailed information, we refer you to the following books. The ASCD publication is written particularly with administrators and school board members in mind; the PDK fastback is oriented more toward teachers and service-learning coordinators. Other books and resource groups are referenced in these two concise publications.

Witmer, J. W., & C. S. Anderson (1994). How to Establish a High School Service Learning Program. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

C. I. Fertman (1994). Service Learning for All Students: Fastback 375. Bloomington. IN: Phi Delta Kappa.

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