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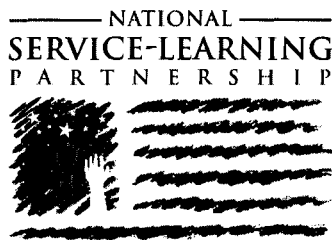
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TALK IT UP

ADVOCATING FOR SERVICE-LEARNING

EDITION NINE

MAKE THE SCHOOL BOARD YOUR ALLY

By Dr. Sheldon H. Berman

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/archives.cfm?archive=tiu>.

“Enhance service-learning as a teaching methodology and ensure that community service-learning is curricular-based and results in civic engagement opportunities for students in all grades while continuing to nurture an ethic of caring, enhance basic skills, develop leadership skills, and encourage involvement in decision-making.”

From *Goals and Strategies for the Hudson Public Schools, 2003-05*

To survive and grow in a school district, service-learning must be supported by the district’s school board and embedded in district policy. Because today’s school boards are focused on standards, testing, and accountability, advocates have to convince them that service-learning is an important vehicle for achieving both district and wider social goals. In preparing this article, I asked Hudson school committee members (in Massachusetts, a school board is called a school committee) to share their views about how advocates can gain support from their boards to promote service-learning at the district level.

The commitment of the Hudson school committee to service-learning evolved over time and in response to specific needs in our town. When I first came to Hudson 11 years ago, there was considerable tension about the quality and cost of our schools. Town meeting participants sparred over the school budget, voters rejected a proposition to provide additional funding for local schools, and some local leaders worried about a “decline in discipline” in the schools. Against this backdrop, the school committee set goals in 1995 that identified service-learning as a key strategy for improving the district’s instructional program so that students could “work on real-world problems within the context of the curriculum in ways that nurture an ethic of caring and enhance basic skills.” The committee also saw service-learning as a way to help bridge the divide between the schools and the community.

Since 1995, our service-learning supporters have been diligent about keeping the school committee informed of our efforts and successes to reassure them that service-learning works. In addition, we built a strong relationship with the media, resulting in many stories about students making a positive contribution to our community.

Today, service-learning remains an essential strategy in our district for both strengthening teaching and helping students become caring and contributing citizens. Now new school committee members, such as Lynn Valcourt, readily grasp the power of service-learning:

I support service-learning as the foundation for building social capital in our community. We witness the immediate benefits in building students' esteem and pride. However, the greater payback is more long-term as that pride in self and service becomes integrated in our future leaders.

The following strategies can help persuade school board members to support districtwide use of service-learning as a core teaching practice. To gain their support takes time and persistence. To retain their support requires high-quality service-learning projects.

- 1 Address school board members’ needs. Put yourself in school board members’ shoes. Take their concerns about service-learning seriously. Be prepared to answer their questions specifically and concretely: Will students be engaged in

appropriate learning activities? What liability will the district incur if students are out in the community? Will transportation costs rise? Will students engage in political issues? Tom Green, a 12-year veteran on the school committee, observes:

I think that most school boards believe that encouraging community service, character education, and civic engagement are important parts of the educational mission they are working to fulfill. But the concern is how much time can be spent on these tasks when there are very specific academic goals that our students are expected to meet (and on which they are being tested). Showing how all these goals can be met with well-integrated service-learning projects is the key to gaining board support.

Learn more about what will motivate individual school board members to support service-learning and then build on this motivation. For instance, in Hudson, school committee member, Linda Gilroy, is moved by the potential of service-learning to “raise students’ self-esteem and thus improve how they perform because they feel better about themselves and more confident in what they can do.”

Remember also that a district’s social and political environment will affect board members’ perceptions about service-learning and frame your argument accordingly. For some boards, service-learning is a way to inspire students who are “turned off from school.” For others, it can create safe schools by strengthening student commitment to caring and kindness. Service-learning can help students become positive community ambassadors and improve the community’s good opinion of how schools can enhance young people’s lives. It can also advance students’ academic achievement, moral development, and career preparation. For the Hudson school committee, service-learning was a positive way to address discipline and build better relations with the community. There is sufficient research bolstering all these purposes to help advocates make the case for service-learning.

2 Offer vivid examples. Provide the school board with information about high-quality service-learning projects that tightly link to powerful instructional units within the curriculum. Explain how the service-learning component extends

and deepens student learning. You will need only two or three examples to help board members see service-learning in a new light and excite them about its power to foster a high level of student engagement. As you discuss these projects, help the board distinguish between community service and service-learning, emphasizing the need for curriculum-integrated projects offering students the opportunities for planning and reflection typical of excellent service-learning projects.

3 Showcase success. Get teachers and students on the school board agenda frequently to spotlight their service-learning accomplishments. Board members need to hear students’ own words about the power of their service-learning experiences. Students are our best spokespersons. Even elementary school children can talk eloquently, if briefly, about what they learned from their service-learning projects. In Hudson, we host an annual service-learning fair before the school committee’s first June meeting. Students and teachers display their service-learning projects and share their results with the school committee, families, and community members.

Students’ families are helpful too. Consider organizing a parent service-learning committee so that parents can make presentations to the board about the impact of service-learning.

The benefits have been so positive, we can't afford not to have service-learning be part of our educational plan for students.

4 Recognize achievement. School board members appreciate having district students, teachers, administrators, or schools acknowledged. This recognition can take many forms—positive media stories, endorsements from community groups, or awards. In Hudson, we have found that presenting individual students with service awards at the high school graduation honors their important contributions and fosters school committee members’ and the community’s pride in the district’s service-learning efforts.

* * *

With school board support, coupled with appropriate district policies, service-learning should have the resource base to strengthen and sustain it over the long term. As Sheila Ansley, chair of our school committee, concludes, “The benefits have been so positive, we can’t afford not to have service-learning be part of our educational plan for students.”

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