

Public Schools, cites Kids Voting USA as
learning that the school system has

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schools must help children under-
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provides the tools to do all three. ~B

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—Peter Negroni

Florida Learn & Serve 1995-96: What Were the Outcomes?

By Joe Follman and Kate Muldoon

This article is taken from a report on the second year of research on quantitative outcomes of K-12 students who participated in service learning projects in Florida in 1995-96. The study involved 29,000 students in 107 subgrants. It illustrates what one state has been able to accomplish.

In Florida, the Learn & Serve America program has fostered evolutionary—sometimes revolutionary—change in teaching and learning. Funded by the Corporation for National Service, Learn & Serve America supports school and community projects that engage students in service learning.

Learn & Serve America began in 1990 with passage of the National and Community Service Trust Act. The 1993 congressional reauthorization created the Corporation for National Service and consolidated corporation programs into three areas: AmeriCorps, Senior Service Corps, and Learn & Serve America.

Learn & Serve America is divided into several categories, including K-12 school-based, K-12 community-based, and higher education programs. States apply for the K-12 Learn & Serve funds and distribute them locally on a competitive basis. Florida State University's Center for Civic Education and Service administers the K-12 school and community-based programs (called Florida Learn & Serve K-12) for the state department of education and the Florida Commission on Community Service, respectively.

Florida Learn & Serve K-12

Florida was in an excellent position when federal funds became available in 1992. At that time, the state had been administering a nearly identical pro-

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ject on a smaller scale for two years using trust funds. With the advent of federal support, Florida expanded existing efforts and used a trust fund as a cash match.

Since then, Florida Learn & Serve K-12 has awarded grants to schools and school districts to engage K-12 students in service learning activities. Nearly 1,000 projects have received awards since 1990. In 1997-98, nearly \$900,000 will be awarded in support of a wide variety of service learning projects.

Service Learning

Service learning is the formal integration of student service into academic instruction (or vice versa). Service learning projects include preparation, action, reflection, recognition, and reciprocity—all participants are both serving and being served. Service learning is a method by which youth learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that:

- Are integrated into the academic curriculum
- Meet actual community needs
- Are coordinated in collaboration with the school and community
- Provide structured time for young people to think, talk, write, and/or present about their service experience
- Provide opportunities to use newly acquired academic skills in "real-life" situations
- Help foster the development of a sense of civic responsibility and caring for others.

Florida Learn & Serve sponsors and promotes several initiatives:

- *School-Based Service Learning Projects.* Schools can apply for up to \$15,000 for service learning in the community or school.
- *Community-Based Service Learning Projects.* Nonprofit organizations can apply for up to \$15,000 to conduct service learning activities with K-12 youth during non-school hours.

School and community-based funds can be used for materials for service projects, transportation, teacher coordination, training, curriculum development, and dissemination activities.

- *Adult Volunteer/Partnerships.* Grants to operate and expand school-based programs in which adults work with students to improve education and student outcomes
- *Youth Service Learning Councils.* Funds support school or district youth

councils that develop, review, and select applications for mini-grants to students, student organizations, and teachers for service learning.

- *Training and Technical Assistance.* The project sponsors conferences, institutes, travel by awardees, and related training and conducts workshops on the application process and requirements.

The primary selection criterion for awards is overall proposal quality. Priority is given to school proposals that:

- Involve disadvantaged students and diverse groups of students
- Are from districts that have not yet received Learn & Serve grants
- Students help design and run
- Are interdisciplinary and/or across age groups
- Are part of established courses and for which the service is part of students' grades.

Activities often address environmental needs, needs of disabled or low-income communities, substance abuse and violence prevention, rural and inner-city schools, youth leadership, intergenerational cooperation, and tutoring.

How Grant Funds Are Spent

The bulk of Florida Learn & Serve funds support raw materials for service projects, transportation to service sites, and teacher released time/substitutes. The general rule is that grant funds may be used for activities to prepare for, travel to, engage in, reflect upon, disseminate information about, and celebrate service learning efforts. Grant funds cannot create positions, pay stipends to students, cover indirect costs, or pay for trips other than to prepare for or conduct service. Matching or in-kind funds and partnerships are required of all projects.

In 1995-96, Florida Learn & Serve K-12 (FL&S) awarded 97 subgrants to Florida public schools and school districts for activities in which students provided volunteer service as an application of classroom instruction. Three of the 97 subgrants created district youth service learning councils that awarded service learning mini-grants. Another 10 subgrants were for adult volunteer projects, for a total of 107 awards worth \$845,590.

Funds were awarded to Florida from the Corporation for National Service and supplemented with state matching grants and in-kind contributions.; Subgrants ranged from \$880 to \$25,392; the average award was \$7,903. Most activities took place between November 1995 and June 1996.

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Methodology

During the grant period, project staff members sent outcome data forms to be completed and submitted by subgrantees. The forms supplemented a project narrative requirement with 17 questions about numbers of participating students; before-and-during comparisons of student GPA, absences, and referrals; and other items. By mid-April 1997, 91 subgrantees had submitted partially or fully completed forms. Data were self-collected and reported.

Project staff members transcribed information from final reports to a spreadsheet. Not all subgrantees responded to every item, so a spreadsheet was developed for each of three key variables. The three independent variables compared before-and-during measurements of participating students' GPA, attendance, and discipline referrals.

As service learning proponents are interested in the impact of service learning on at-risk student participants, FL&S evaluated a subset of these students for each variable. At-risk participants were defined by subgrantees in their mid-term and final reports and included students who were characterized as likely dropouts; severely learning disabled; emotionally, mentally, or physically handicapped; frequently referred for inappropriate behavior; or those who have entered the juvenile justice system. Subgrants with a preponderance of at-risk students were included in this category.

Results and Outcome Data

1. Student Participants

Of 107 subgrantees, 82 responded to this item (77 percent); 24,518 students provided service for an average of 299 students per subgrant.

Extrapolating that average to the other 15 school-based projects, an estimated 29,000 students participated.

2. Hours of Service Performed

Again, 82 of 107 subgrants responded, reporting 275,110 total student service hours, an average of 3,355 hours per subgrant. Extrapolating the hours of service to the other 15 school-based projects resulted in an estimate of 325,480 service hours. Calculated at the current minimum wage of \$4.75 per hour, this student service is equivalent to \$1,546,030 worth of work or 1.83 times the total amount awarded.

3. Attendance of Participating Students

Forty-five subgrantees responded to the questions comparing participating students' absences before and during their subgrant. Twenty-eight

of 45 (62 percent) showed a decrease in student absences; the average decrease was 46 percent. Nine (20 percent) reported no change in attendance, and 20 percent reported an increase in absences.

3a. Attendance in Subgrants with At-Risk Student Participants

Twenty-eight of the 45 (62 percent) subgrantees reporting on attendance also had a preponderance of at-risk students. Students in 19 of 28 (68 percent) subgrants showed improved attendance; the average decrease in absences was 47 percent. Eleven percent (3 of 28) had no decrease in absences; 6 of 28 (21 percent) indicated students had increased absences.

4. Improvement in GPA

Fifty-four subgrantees responded to questions about students' GPA before and during their service learning subgrant. Forty of the 54 (74 percent) indicated an improvement in grades during the subgrant period. Of those who improved, 20 of 40 (50 percent) gained 0.5 point or more in their GPA. Nine of the 54 (17 percent) reported that students' grades stayed the same; while 5 subgrantees (5 percent) reported that students' grades went down.

4a. Improvement in GPA in Subgrants with At-Risk Student Participants

Thirty-six of the 54 subgrants (67 percent) reporting on GPA also had a preponderance of at-risk students. Students in 27 of the 36 (75 percent) subgrants improved their grades, 60 percent by 0.5 or more. Seventeen percent (6 of 36) of programs indicated that students' grades remained the same, while 3 of the 36 (8 percent) indicated that students' grades decreased.

5. Numbers of Discipline Referrals

Fifty-six subgrantees provided information on numbers of students receiving discipline referrals before and during their service learning subgrant. Thirty-eight of 56 (68 percent) subgrantees indicated a decrease in student referrals. The average decrease was 68 percent. Twelve of the 56 (21 percent) showed no change, while 6 (11 percent) reported an increase in referrals.

5a. Numbers of Discipline Referrals in Subgrants with At-Risk Student Participants

Thirty-three of the 56 subgrantees reporting on discipline referrals also contained a preponderance of at-risk students. Of the 33, 27 (82 percent) reported a decline in student referrals. The average decline was 60 percent. Students in 3 of the 33 subgrants (9 percent) had approximately the same numbers of referrals; 9 percent of programs reported an increase in referrals.

Analysis of 1995–96 Data and Comparison with 1994–95 Data

Data from 1995–96 Florida Learn & Serve subgrantees mirror the positive trends identified from 1994–95. In the three key areas (grades, conduct, and attendance), large majorities of students made improvements during the time they were participating. For example:

- Attendance improved in 62 percent of the reporting subgrants (62 percent in 1994–95).
- Students' average GPA improved in 74 percent (70 percent in 1994–95).
- Sixty-eight percent had fewer discipline referrals (76 percent in 1994–95).

Improvements made by at-risk students are even more promising. For subgrants in which a preponderance of the students were identified as at-risk:

- 68 percent showed improved attendance (64 percent in 1994–95)
- 75 percent showed improved GPA (84 percent in 1994–95)
- 82 percent showed fewer discipline referrals (78 percent in 1994–95).

These figures represent a total of 50,000 students and 212 subgrants. Seventeen of the subgrants were adult volunteer efforts that did not involve students as service providers. Approximately two-thirds of the subgrants in 1995–96 were new initiatives. Averaged over 1994–96, the figures are as follows:

Participants

- 25,000 students participated directly (i.e., provided service) each year
- An average of 254 students participated on each subgrant

Hours of Service

- 304,430 hours of student service were provided each year
- Service that the students provided each year would be worth \$1,446,000 if calculated at \$4.75 per hour

Attendance

- 62 percent of reporting subgrants showed improvements in attendance of participating students
- 66 percent of reporting subgrants with a preponderance of at-risk students showed improvements in attendance
- The average decrease in absences was 45.5 percent
- The average decrease in absences in subgrants with a preponderance of at-risk students was 43 percent

GPA

- 72 percent of reporting subgrants showed improvements in participating students' GPA
- 79.5 percent of reporting subgrants with a preponderance of at-risk students showed improvement in participating students' GPA
- Of subgrants showing GPA improvement, 46 percent improved grades by 0.5 or more
- Of subgrants with a preponderance of at-risk students, 48 percent improved grades by 0.5 or more

Conduct

- 72 percent of reporting subgrants showed a decline in the number of discipline referrals among participating students
- 80 percent of reporting subgrants with a preponderance of at-risk students showed a decline in discipline referrals of participating students
- Of subgrants showing a decline in discipline referrals, the average decline was 65.5 percent
- Of subgrants showing a decline in discipline referrals and which had a preponderance of at-risk students, the average decline was 60 percent.

Limits of the Data

School-based service learning activities do not occur in a test tube. Other factors affect participating students' grades, attendance, and conduct. These studies neither identify those factors nor measure their impact on participating students. It is fair to question the correlation between participation in service learning and academic and behavioral improvements.

Subgrant activities ranged greatly in type, scope/scale, duration, number of activities, and level of curricular integration. The key data elements (attendance, GPA, and discipline referrals) are formally collected by schools, which lends credibility to their accuracy. However, the fact that the outcomes are self-reported—usually by already overextended teachers—is a methodological concern. We do not know, for example, the precise length of the before-and-during reporting periods used by subgrantees or how GPAs were calculated.

In designing the data elements and final report forms, the project staff walked a very fine line. On the one hand, data elements need to be precise enough to ensure valid reporting and withstand outside scrutiny as well as measure intended outcomes of subgrants. On the other, requesting too much detail and verifiability would burden subgrantees to the point that

most would not return the forms or would leave major portions blank. The form used is a compromise that achieved an 85 percent return rate.

For all these reasons, key data are presented in terms of trends—percentages of subgrantees responding within each element—instead of being combined. To determine what kind of impact one project had at a certain school on individual students, the data must be examined school by school.

Conclusions

The clear trend from 1995–96 Florida Learn & Serve subgrant final reports is that there are quantifiable positive impacts on K–12 students engaged in service learning. By heavy majorities (62–82 percent), participating students showed improvements in attendance, conduct, and academic performance. Moreover, the 1995–96 outcomes are very similar to and validate results obtained from 1994–95 projects, suggesting these outcomes may be replicated elsewhere.

The large statistical sample over two years—50,000 students, 197 projects involving student service, multi-grade levels, a wide variety of projects, different project durations, degrees of curricular integration, etc.—lends weight to the trends observed but also highlights caveats and raises interesting questions:

- Are there particular elements of these subgrants that brought positive results, or are the trends the result of a constellation of factors associated with the service learning efforts?
- Did at-risk students show greater improvements merely because they had farther to rise, or did participation have a greater impact on them?
- Would effects be greater with greater curricular integration? (Data from 1994–95 found no such correlation, but there was also no scale for assessing the level of curricular integration.)
- What impact did activities have on service recipients?
- How far can the data be trusted when they were not collected under rigorous conditions?
- Was students' academic performance actually better, or is it easier to get a good grade in a "service learning" class?
- What if most of the subgrantees who did not submit data were the less successful ones? Does that mean the remainder skew the overall trends?

This study cannot answer such questions; more long-term research is needed. In the absence of hard data, service learning has leaned uncomfortably on qualitative measures. Because of its combination of service with education, the truest measure of the value of service learning will need to be a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures over time. ~B

Service Learning in Maryland: Making Academics More Relevant

By Marian Rouse Finney

Maryland is the first state in the nation to require every student to perform service as a condition of receiving a high school diploma. During the last 15 years, a strong support system for service learning has emerged in Maryland. The diversity of opportunities for service are broad, challenging, and inviting.

Service learning as defined by the Maryland Student Service Alliance (MSSA) implies that the percentage of students who demonstrate the ability to reason, solve problems, apply knowledge, and communicate effectively will increase substantially; that all students will be involved in activities that promote and demonstrate good citizenship and community service/service learning; and that the students will be knowledgeable about the diverse cultural heritages of the nation and the world.

Maryland's service learning requirement reads: "Students shall complete one of the following: (1) 75 hours of student service that includes preparation, action, and reflection components, and that, at the discretion of the local school system, may begin during middle grades; and (2) a locally designed program in student service that has been approved by the state superintendent of schools."

Maryland's New Requirement

MSSA defines service learning as making a difference through actions of caring for others through personal contacts, indirect service, or civic action, whether in school or in the community, with preparation and reflection. The service learning program is administered through the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

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