

1990

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Recommended Citation

Gomez, Barbara, "Service-Learning Advances School Improvement: A Position Paper from the International Service Learning Initiative" (1990). *Special Topics, General*. Paper 89.
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SERVICE-LEARNING ADVANCES SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

**A
POSITION PAPER**

from the
NATIONAL SERVICE LEARNING INITIATIVE

March, 1990

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The publication of this paper is made possible in part by a grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. The interpretations and conclusions contained in this publication represent the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the Mott Foundation, its trustees, or officers.

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The National Service-Learning Initiative is a collaborative project organized by the National Youth Leadership Council to build the capacity of schools and youth organizations across America to infuse service-learning into their core curriculum and programs. The Initiative consists of individuals and organizations who share a common vision for service-learning and are committed to working together to advance both quality and quantity of practice.

This paper represents the first in a series of position papers, projects and materials to be generated by the Initiative.

The National Youth Leadership Council is a non-profit organization based in Minnesota committed to engaging youth as valued partners in community, state, national and global development, leadership and public service.

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Service-learning

- * helps students learn
- * enriches the curriculum
- * brings schools, families, communities together
- * enlivens the meaning of democracy
- * recasts the role of student and school
- * stimulates teachers to put coursework in context
- * protects and encourages active learning
- * teaches relevance of the 3R's
- * prepares students for full-time work assignments
- * produces alert and helpful citizens
- * encourages at risk students to try again -- harder
- * triggers systemic change in traditional schools
- * shows why "giving is getting"
- * fosters a spirit of caring and lifetime service
- * strengthens the linkage between service and learning

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.01 The base on which the United States is built is participatory democracy -- achieved only when all citizens are included in choice and decision-making. Nothing could be worse for our nation than to have our children feel alienated from the communities in which they attend school. For more than 200 years the rest of the world has been watching our progress, and as we have succeeded they have made efforts to emulate our sense of individual freedom and collective responsibility for governance.

1.02 Community building and community improvement are on-going processes which should include our schools as active participants, and our young people both as learners and teachers. There are compelling reasons for bringing our schools and our communities closer together through service-learning, and by so doing to assure the quadruple effects of (a) making communities more livable, (b) giving youngsters hands-on learning experiences, (c) improving the school success rate, and (d) assuring a sense of self-worth in all our youngsters, including those struggling with economic, physical, or social disabilities.

1.03 The alarm has sounded, student learning needs improving, and schools are besieged with such societal problems as substance abuse, teen pregnancy, alienation from both school and community, and an unnatural preoccupation with personal materialistic symbols. Whatever the causes, educational or social, nationwide our schools fail to teach basic literacy to two of every five pupils.

1.04 Service-learning, of course, is not the only way to help strengthen our communities, improve student scholarship, and eradicate selfish materialism, but it is one of the very strongest weapons in our arsenal against ignorance and civic apathy. Applying knowledge to community needs, and using community service to stimulate learning is a win-win method of teaching. It uses the best of pedagogy in natural settings.

1.05 We all learn by doing. But in service-learning we add another dimension -- personal unselfish growth. Students engaged in community improvement projects not only learn how to learn and practice learned skills, but they learn about themselves; and further, they enjoy the thrill which comes from caring and being cared about.

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II. DISSIPATING SOME SERVICE-LEARNING MYTHS

2.01 **Service-learning: Isn't that the same as volunteerism?** Yes, and no. More no than yes. Yes; because when we talk about "service" in service-learning, we do mean that kind of volunteer spirit which sees a human need, and unselfishly seeks to meet it in some positive way. But no, because we don't mean service which is ad hoc, or isolated from reflection or academics. We don't wish to be misunderstood, volunteerism is of basic importance to the operation of every one of our communities, and is the backbone of human service care. But when we speak of fusing service with learning, we mean just that, regardless of what the volunteer activity is.

2.02 **Service-learning has nothing to do with academic learning.** Is that a vocational education counselor making that statement? An enormous number of all voc ed students are learning about and doing work/study in service occupations, such as sales, clerking, maintenance, restaurant and motel support staff, etc. We agree, such cooperative education ventures are extremely important; they bolster our arguments in favor of combining academics and community service. But when we talk about service in connection with learning, we mean unpaid, voluntary service in a government or non-profit setting; and we think of that work the way a chemistry teacher thinks of student work in the laboratory. Clerking at Penny's and studying bookkeeping are, in our terminology, work/study. Assisting the town clerk using what is learned in a bookkeeping course, we think of as service-learning. And we certainly would agree that every student should have work experience in both settings; that is in the free-enterprise marketplace as well as in each community's network of human services organizations.

2.03 **Service-learning has nothing to offer the "at risk" student.** Some myths seem more real than others. Many high school honor societies require XX hours of voluntary service for membership; also many school service clubs require high grade averages for membership. Together, these "top student" programs support the myth that "at risk" students would be poor service-learning risks. Yet, in the few instances when students on the failure line have been given an opportunity to serve, and to use the academic skills they are struggling to learn to carry out that service, they thrive, not wilt. In fact, it's often the service work which triggers renewed interest in academics. Let a 15-year old on the verge of dropping out spend some time helping an autistic young adult in a "buddy" program, and the determination for the tutor to improve language skills is intensified. Peer tutoring -- even in those instances when a very poor student tutors a very poor student -- has, in test after test, proved positive. Service-learning is not the only way to remove the "risk" in "at risk," but it's certainly one of the most effective since "learning by doing" is so very effective.

2.04 **You just do it: There's no need for any special curriculum renovation.** That's no myth if what's being described is a mandated community service program of so many hours totally outside the school hours, and not connected in any way to coursework instruction. But what a missed opportunity that is. Talking about the service done, seeing the community need in historic contexts, feeling the power which comes from seeing what a like-minded group can do to make a significant change, feeling that inner spiritual joy of satisfaction, recognizing how research skills underpin work skills, keeping a journal reflecting thoughts as well as accomplishments -- these come from learning to serve and from using learning to serve. For those teachers who have always found ways to incorporate voluntary community service in their curriculum planning, they do "just do it."

2.05

Isn't that what drunk drivers and white-collar criminals do for restitution? Oh, dear, how almost true it is! In fact, as you read this in 1990, more young people are doing community service through a court order or for punishment required by local authorities, than are doing service-learning purposefully to bring to bear on community needs fresh learning and skills which need honing. In fact, we wish that more learning was part of those mandated service hours. We wish that punishment wasn't the purpose; instead that engagement with and a growing sense of love for the community was the purpose. We wish that everyone who does community service would have the opportunity to recognize that service not only as enrichment for the community, but for themselves. We believe that "giving is getting" not that "giving is another way of hurting." Getting what? Improved sense of self, better sense of participatory democracy, higher set of social values, skill practice, appreciation from and for the community, a richer and more meaningful course of academic study.

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III. DEFINING SERVICE-LEARNING

3.01 **A formal statement:** Service-learning is student learning and development through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet real community needs and that are coordinated in collaboration with the school and community. The service-learning is integrated into the students' academic curriculum and provides structured time for them to talk, write, and think about what they did and saw during the actual service activity.

3.02 **An explanation:** Service-learning is the intentional integration of curricular content with community service activities. Effective service-learning led by committed, well-prepared educators yields documented outcomes benefiting young people, the community, and schools.

3.03 **A plea:** Our school youth deserve to understand the linkage between service -- particularly service meeting local human needs -- and learning. At the present time, too few school-aged youth participating in community service do so as part of the school-community connection; that is, as an outgrowth of the curriculum or as part of school-related values education. By designing school-based programs, service can be integrated into the curriculum, building both academic skills and affective understanding.

3.04

A truth: We all learn better when what is being taught is not only put in some perspective, but for which we can imagine or experience some applicability and usefulness. This is particularly true for school-age youth. It's the reason we have laboratories for the teaching of chemistry, stages for the teaching of drama, courts for the teaching of basketball, parades for the teaching of marching, inter-school contests for students of debate, and, yes, why many schools support voluntary student community service. It's true, many schools stop at the offering (or even mandating) of community service, and make little or no effort to connect service to academic or vocational coursework. That's pure and simple "community service." What this paper espouses is a deeper meaning, a fuller commitment: The direct connection (fusion, integration, coalescence, merger, union, synthesis, confederation) between the in-school curriculum and service in the community.

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IV. ADVANCING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

4.01 Serious systemic and structural change has not occurred in any significant manner in our public school system in 100 years. It has been said that were teachers of classrooms in the 1890's to return to a classroom today, other than a few pieces of equipment, they would find little change in how the day and the curriculum are divided up. Perhaps the same will be applicable in 2090. But we doubt it. We think the calls for more than cosmetic change in both how schools are structured and how they deliver instruction are too strident and persistent to be disregarded much longer.

4.02 And we're even surer that school/community connections and community/school partnerships are undergoing radical and important changes. If there ever was a time when it was best for our children, their families, and their communities to isolate the schools both mentally and physically, there are few true educators today who aren't espousing the need for all of society to work together to teach our children literacy, citizenship, and workplace skills. There are few who would not agree with the following statement: Education, employment, the economy, and community development are interdependent. And it's that interdependence which calls forth service-learning as a vital link in deep structural educational change.

4.03 True, our public schools need expertly prepared teachers and administrators; unselfish board members; highly qualified support staffs; financial security; as well as strong support from churches, homes, and businesses. Service-learning is a partnership; educators come in two forms -- those who work primarily in a school setting and those who work primarily in a service setting. As they work together, each contributes to academic and vocational understanding for the students. This collaboration will help restructure schooling from didactic teaching methods to a more Socratic atmosphere; from piecemeal delivery of fragmented subject matter to integrated learning; from isolation from the community and its human services to cooperation with those services.

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V. INVESTIGATING OUTCOMES OF SERVICE-LEARNING

5.01 This is a most challenging arena for service-learning. Admittedly, very little "hard" research evidence is available on the topic. And as Hedin and Conrad state in their December 1989 review of research in high school community service programs: "Not only is the independent variable, service, difficult to define, but any service activity has a wide range of plausible outcomes." They go on to assert, "Sound research into the effects of community service is difficult, but not impossible. Many solid and inventive studies have been undertaken and, while none are without flaw, they provide useful information on the impact of the practice." By adding learning to service, the mix is even more complex, yet there are some outcomes which are recognizable and decidedly positive. Educators generally agree that the following outcomes have been "proved" through student involvement in service-learning [recognizing the softness of "proof" in this area].

5.02 **RE: Personal Growth and Development.**

- * Development of strong values and positive morals
- * A sense of personal worth and competence
- * Self-esteem (self-respect, not self-importance)
- * A willingness to explore new roles and interests
- * Risk-taking; acceptance of fresh challenges
- * Accepting the consequence of behavior
- * Taking responsibility for problem-solving.

5.03

RE: Intellectual Development and Academic Learning.

- * Such basic academic skills as reading, writing, calculating, speaking, listening
- * Problem solving, reviewing choices, analytical criticism (what is often called "higher level" thinking skills)
- * Such learning-from-experience skills as observation, questioning, knowledge application, summarizing, testing, assessing results
- * Motivation both to learn and to retain that learning
- * Development of character judgment, insight, understanding of ethos, sensitivity to underlying themes.

5.04

RE: Social Growth and Development.

- * Concern for the welfare of others
- * Social responsibility
- * Political efficacy (strategies)
- * Civic participation
- * Exploration of service-related career paths
- * Sensitivity (understanding and appreciation) toward people from a wide range of backgrounds.

VI. INTRODUCING A SERVICE-LEARNING CURRICULUM

6.01 Would school children learn a second language more quickly and more effectively if they had the opportunity to practice with a native speaker of that language? The answer to that question is an unqualified, "Yes."

6.02 Let's take that curriculum offering a step further and ask: Would students of a second language learn that language more quickly and effectively if they could visit with, write to, and perform some service for a native speaker in a hospital, nursing home, housing for the elderly, or for one who lives alone in an isolated environment? "Yes," again. A student of Russian (or Spanish, French, German, Chinese) who has a pen pal in a Veteran's hospital, for example, would develop strong translation skills and improve his/her working vocabulary; and in addition would experience the love reciprocated in love which enhances all of living and learning.

6.03 The jury is no longer out on whether it is better for teaching to be direct instruction (didactic and passive), or cooperative (integrated and active). But while we know that didactic teaching is not as effective as integrated instruction, so few teachers in our public schools have been so prepared, the majority continue to fall back on the "old" and are tremulous about trying the "new."

6.04 Service-learning is an excellent bridge for them to cross. A student in a social studies class who spends time with homeless families develops an emotional and human connection with the course concepts. Homelessness is no longer just a vocabulary word to learn to spell and define; instead it is a complex issue which has sounds, smells, and emotions as well as a grounding in history, geography, and economics.

6.05 As older students tutor younger pupils, they develop a more thorough understanding of the language (or discipline) they are studying. In developing a plan for the lessons they are teaching, by struggling to discover effective ways to explain ideas, they develop an integrated understanding of the subject. Such an instructional approach -- as empirical tests have regularly shown -- helps both tutor and tutored learn, retain, and apply what's being taught. This is engaged learning, and if the need of the one being served, whether that service is manual or mental, seems important to the student doing the serving, then he or she is "engaged." And engagement means internalizing which is another way of saying "learning."

6.06 Whether the curriculum serves the primary grades focusing on the 3R's, or is interdisciplinary problem-solving at the middle school level, or a high school mix of required and elective courses, the combining of service activities with academic study -- as in the case of the study of a foreign language -- should enhance both the service and the learning. From kindergartners who prepare messages of love and encouragement for hospitalized elderly --learning penmanship, language arts, and drawing -- to high school art students designing and painting a mural for a hospice, such skills as eye-hand coordination, perspective, color use, and line control are reinforced at the same time that there is a growing understanding of health and wellness needs, an appreciation of positive community-improvement values, a developing awareness of the responsibilities of citizenship in a participatory democracy, and on a very personal level, that glow of goodness often referred to as self-esteem, but which is more than that. It is self-realization -- the consciousness that service-learning has a purpose for one's self, for the one being served, and for society as a whole. And this, whether you are six or sixteen.

6.07 For each of the standard K-12 curriculum areas, fusing service with academic coursework isn't just one way to interest students in service (or conversely to interest them in studying), but is the exemplification of learning by doing. In addition -- taking note that one of the main purposes of our public schools is the production of literate, caring, contributing citizens -- service-learning reaches to the heart of all three.

6.08 When school youngsters help prepare income tax returns for senior citizens as part of a math course; or do some statistical analysis for a large service organization; or make graphs to depict activities for a government agency; or enter data into a computer business system for a non-profit organization; or teach computer literacy to interested senior citizens...they are doing service-learning. Their curriculum has been enriched. The lives of those they've touched have been enriched. Their teachers have used active cooperative learning methods to solidify concepts and to improve skills through practice.

6.09 It is not the purpose of this paper to run through the curriculum indicating possible service-learning projects and activities at every grade level. The above are indicators, not prescriptions. Individual teachers, teams of teachers, single students, pairs of students, groups of students -- in school, out of school, course-related, or actual course assignments -- the variety of ways to do community service are legion. We might even say there may be as many ways to do service-learning as there are teachers.

6.10 What we have wanted to clarify is just why service-learning is so important; how it is aiding and abetting the best in school reform efforts; and explain how service-learning is more than "doing" community service.

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