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Costs and Benefits and Service Learning

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Costs and Benefits of Service Learning

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A growing body of evidence points to school-based service learning as an effective means of achieving a variety of critical school and community goals. But what do we know about the costs of service learning?

In a time of many demands on school systems and limited budgets, is service learning just another expensive add-on or is it an affordable strategy for strengthening curriculum?

The answer, not surprisingly, is: It depends. Service learning in American schools takes on an almost infinite array of shapes and strategies, and the associated costs depend on the scope of the efforts, the ways in which it is integrated into the school or district and the type of service projects that make up the program.

But for schools and school districts in most communities, service learning represents a relatively low-cost strategy for enhancing young peoples' educational experience. The large majority of schools that have integrated service learning into their curriculum have done so without additional, outside funding, and our research at Brandeis University suggests that the payback in terms of real services provided to the community substantially outweighs the

A national evaluation finds moderate costs with districtwide initiatives showing the lowest per-pupil expenses

costs involved in integrating service learning in the curriculum.

A National Evaluation

Between 1994 and 1997, the Center for Human Resources at Brandeis studied service-learning programs at seven middle schools and 10 high schools around the country as part of the evaluation of the federally funded Learn and Serve America program. Learn and Serve was established in 1993 as part of the National and Community Service Trust Act and provides funding for school- and community-based service-learning

programs for school-aged youth. One thing we looked at in the evaluation were the financial costs and benefits of those programs, focusing on the 1995-96 program year.

The schools in our study had adopted a wide range of service-learning strategies. Some were schoolwide efforts, aimed at involving every student in some form of service learning over the course of the year. Others integrated service learning into one or more core academic classes (a science or civics class, for example) as a way of connecting mainstream academic subjects to community experiences. Still others created stand-alone elective or advisory period programs.

In some communities, service learning was part of large, districtwide service-learning efforts, while in others, service learning was focused on a single school. At a minimum, service learning was tied at each school in our study to a formal, structured curriculum. It included regular student discussions, writing assignments and presentations as vehicles for reflection and involved substantial hours of service in the community (an average of more than 60 hours of service per student).

Each program in our study had received a grant through the Learn and

Serve program. (Under the Learn and Serve funding mechanism, the Corporation for National Service, the federal funding agency, issues grants to the states, which disperse the funds on a competitive basis to local schools, districts and community agencies.) The grants ranged widely, from \$7,500 for a single school to \$95,000 for a large districtwide initiative. The average grant was approximately \$34,000, with schools providing a partial match of school dollars and in-kind services.

The schools in our study were unusual among public schools in that they had received outside grants. The majority of schools involved in service learning receive little or no outside funding.

Moderate Costs

The costs of the service-learning programs in the schools we studied also varied widely, from a low of approximately \$14 per participant in one districtwide effort to a high of nearly \$1,700 for one of the small, single classroom efforts. (These figures include both grant funds and reported match.)

In general, the districtwide programs had the lowest per-pupil costs because the overhead costs of a service-learning coordinator or transportation and supplies were spread among a relatively large number of schools and students. Single-school and single-classroom efforts tended to have a higher cost on a per-pupil basis.

Even in the smaller programs, however, the costs were not high. Among the smaller, single-school or single-classroom programs in our study, the average cost per participant was approximately \$149. Among the broad, districtwide programs, the average cost was approximately \$27 per pupil, and the average cost among all the programs in our study was \$52 per student.

Nationally, the Corporation for National Service, the sponsoring agency for the Learn and Serve program, estimated program costs in 1995-96 at approximately \$47 in grant funds per participant. The comparable figure in our sites (that is, program costs in terms of cash grants, excluding match) was approximately \$35.

When compared to annual per-pupil costs nationally, service learning hardly counts as a major budget item. According to the U.S. Department of Education, average per-pupil expenditures in 1995-96 were \$6,855. At \$52 per student, the average service-learning program represents less than one percent of



Working in the school garden is part of the service-learning program for elementary school members of the East Bay Conservation Corps in Oakland, Calif.

that expenditure.

The use of the Learn and Serve grant funds also varied among schools and districts. In most of the sites, the large majority of funds were used to pay for transportation, materials and supplies and recognition events (award dinners, t-shirts, etc.) for student volunteers and the community agencies they worked with. Several sites also used their grant funds to provide professional development for participating teachers. Others used part of their grant to pay for service-learning teachers and students to participate in national or regional service-learning meetings.

Personnel Costs

What is striking is that few sites used their grants to pay salaries. Four of the 17 sites used their grants to support a school or district-level service-learning coordinator, and three used grant funds to pay a portion of the salary of the lead service-learning teacher, using the Learn and Serve grants to leverage other federal or foundation grants (School-to-Work, Safe and Drug Free Schools, etc.).

For most sites, however, the salaries of the teachers and administrators involved in service learning were covered by the regular school and district budgets. Where service learning was being integrated into existing classes and programs, it required a change in the activities of existing staff rather than the addition of new salaries and personnel.

The largest investments in staff

were in those schools and districts that took a schoolwide or districtwide approach and brought a service-learning coordinator on board to develop and oversee service sites in the community and to help classroom teachers integrate service learning into the curriculum. For those schools and districts, the coordinator role was seen as a means of easing the route into service learning for classroom teachers (many of whom do not have extensive contacts in the community) and of leveraging change in instruction on a larger scale. In several of those districts, the district now has picked up the coordinator's salary as part of the regular district budget.

This, in fact, appears to be the more common experience among American schools that have introduced service learning into their curriculum. According to a recent U.S. Department of Education survey of 1,800 elementary, middle and high schools, a large majority adopted service learning without the use of outside grants. Nearly 64 percent reported that they had community-service programs in place and a third provided organized service learning.

Of those with community service or service learning, 84 percent reported they received no outside funding to support their programs. The regular district budget was the sole source of funding. Of those who did use outside support, the most common sources of funding were corporate contributions, other federal

and state grants (such as Safe and Drug-Free School money) and foundation grants. Only 10 percent reported receiving federal Learn and Serve funds.

Practical Matters

So what implications do these figures have for school administrators? Several points seem clear:

"Each program in our study had received a grant through the Learn and Serve program."

- *Service learning is affordable and can be a relatively low-cost strategy for achieving a wide range of academic and community goals.*

Because service learning can be integrated into existing classes and curriculum, it does not require significant investments in new staff or equipment. It involves a change in teaching strategies as opposed to adoption of a new, stand-alone program.

- *Service learning will require some additional resources.*

The integration of service learning

throughout a school or a district will require an investment in professional development, as well as time and support for teachers as they develop a new instructional approach and a new set of classroom activities. Schools and districts that adopt service learning also will have to commit to finding at least some resources to pay for materials or

project supplies, transportation and recognition programs.

The data from our Learn and Serve sites suggests that these costs are modest on a per-pupil basis, and the Department of Education data suggest that many schools have been able to either cover those costs or to find corporate and foundation sponsors for those expenses.

- *Service learning means dealing with practical, day-to-day concerns.*

Schools and districts interested in service learning may need to address a

variety of practical matters, such as insurance and liability. School leaders may need to create more flexible school schedules so students have time for service activities outside the building. They also will need to make the case for the value of hands-on learning, which can be as important for a student's academic progress as the time they spend at their classroom desks.

These "costs" generally do not appear on the official balance sheet, but they represent practical issues that need to be considered when building service learning into the curriculum. As one superintendent recently commented, "It's easy to get caught by these kinds of issues. But you need to find ways to say, 'Yes,' so your teachers can move ahead."

- *Schools and districts need to decide whether to hire a part-time or full-time coordinator.*

Perhaps the most critical decision affecting the costs of service learning is whether or not to hire a service-learning coordinator. Approximately 18 percent of the schools with service learning in the Department of Education survey had a service-learning coordinator on staff.

The experience of our Learn and

Additional Resources

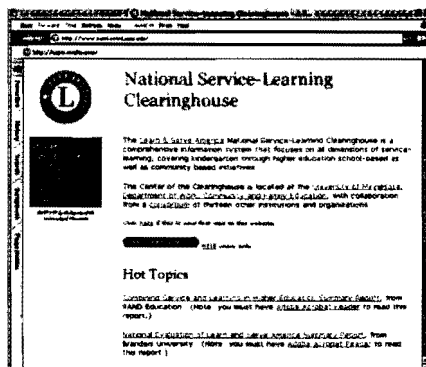
The authors of the various articles on service learning in this issue of *The School Administrator* have recommended the following resources on service learning:

Resource Centers

Corporation for National Service (1201 New York Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20525; 202-606-5000; www.nationalservice.org). This organization runs the Learn and Serve Program, which provides training and program support. It also is the major funder of service-learning initiatives.

Education Commission of the States (707 17th St., Suite 2700, Denver, Colo. 80202-3427; 303-299-3644; www.ecs.org). ECS is home to the Compact for Learning and Citizenship and has an array of issue papers and reports on service learning.

National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (University of Minnesota, 1954 Buford Ave., R460 VoTech Ed Build-



ing, St. Paul, Minn. 55108; 800-808-7378 or 612-625-6278; www.nicsl.coled.umn.edu). The clearinghouse maintains a national database of school programs, operates a listserve for practitioners and provides information on curriculum and evaluation.

National Youth Leadership Council (1910 W. County Road B, Roseville, Minn. 55113; 651-631-3672; www.nylc.org). The council is home to Learn and Serve America Exchange and provides training and technical assistance. W.K. Kellogg Foundation (One Michi-

gan Ave. East, Battle Creek, Mich. 49017-4058; 202-778-1040; www.learningindeed.org). The foundation launched Learning In Deed, a national initiative to engage more young people in service to others as part of their academic life. The initiative views service learning as a teaching strategy.

Reports and Articles

"Building Support for Service Learning," by Shelley H. Billig, available from RMC Research Corp., Denver, Colo. (800-922-3636 or 303-825-3636, rnc@rmcdenver.com)

"Essential Elements of Service Learning," produced by the National Service-Learning Cooperative and available from the National Youth Leadership Council (651-631-3672 or www.nylc.org)

"Evaluation of Service-Learning and Educational Reform in the State of New Hampshire," by Shelley H. Billig

Serve study sites (as well as other schools we have examined over the years) suggests that a service-learning coordinator can provide a tremendous boost to school or district efforts to promote service learning. A service-learning coordinator can help to raise awareness and orient teachers to service learning across an organization and can provide the ongoing support and training that teachers often need as they build service learning into their classes.

Equally important, a service-learning coordinator can help classroom teachers identify, recruit, train and monitor service sites for their students. Given the variety of tasks faced by teachers on a day-to-day basis and the fact that many teachers do not live in the communities in which they teach, this kind of assistance is often critical in moving service into a school or district.

The major dilemma in establishing a coordinator's position is the challenge of funding the position on a permanent basis. Too often, schools or districts that are able to hire coordinators using grant funds (from Learn and Serve or other sources) are not able to maintain the position once the grant funds are gone. If

schools go this route, they should begin planning early on how to transition the position so it's included in the regular district budget.

A Balancing Act

It's also important to look at the benefits of service learning—not only to students, but to the school and the community. A review of the research on the impact of service learning on students (see related article, page 14) makes a strong case that service learning has a positive impact on the civic, academic and social development of school-aged youth. Our research on the Learn and Serve program also highlighted some of the positive benefits for schools and the community.

As part of our study of the Learn and Serve program, we conducted interviews



Project Yes elementary school club members of the East Bay Conservation Corps in Oakland, Calif., make handmade paper from recycled newspapers as part of a service-learning curriculum.

with representatives from more than 150 local agencies that provided service sites for service-learning students.

Altogether, the agencies in our 17 study sites estimated that more than

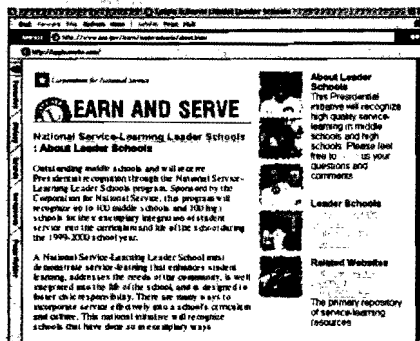
and Jill Conrad, available from RMC Research Corp., Denver, Colo. (800-922-3636 or 303-825-3636, rmc@rmc-denver.com)

"How Quality Service-Learning Develops Civic Values," by William Morgan and Matthew Streb, available from Indiana University, Civic Literacy Project, Bloomington, Ind. (812-856-4677 or serve.indiana.edu)

Linking Federal Programs and Service-Learning: A Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation Guide, by Shelley H. Billig and Nancy P. Kraft, available from Technomic Publishing Co. Inc., Lancaster, Pa., (800-233-9936 or 717-291-5609 or www.techpub.com)

"National Evaluation of Learn and Serve America: Summary Report" by Alan Melchior, available from the Corporation for National Service (202-606-5000 or www.nationalservice.org/learn/index.html)

"Perceptions: Understanding and Re-



sponding to What People Think About Service-Learning," available through the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Learning In Deed initiative, Battle Creek, Mich. (202-778-1040 and www.learningindeed.org)

Phi Delta Kappan, May 2000 and June 1991 issues focused on service learning. Back issues available from PDK (800-766-1156 or 812-339-1156 and www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kappan.htm)

The Role of Service-Learning in Educational Reform, by Robert Bhaerman, Karin Cordell and Barbara Gomez, available from the National Society for Experiential Education, Alexandria, Va. (703-933-0017 and nsee.org)

"Service Learning and Community Service in K-12 Public Schools," by Rebecca Skinner and Christopher Chapman, (NCES 1999043) available from National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, D.C. (877-433-7827 and www.nces.ed.gov)

"The Service Learning Planning and Resource Guide," available from Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington, D.C. (202-336-7016 or www.ccsso.org)

"Standards for School-Based and Community-Based Service-learning Programs," by the Alliance for Service-Learning in Educational Reform, available from Close Up Foundation, Alexandria, Va. (800-CLOSEUP or 703-706-3300 or www.closeup.org)

Where's the Learning in Service-Learning? by Janet Eyler and Dwight Giles Jr., available from Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco (415-433-1740 and www.josseybass.com).

1,000 students were involved in about 300 distinct projects or activities each semester, providing approximately 10,000 hours of service during the year. On average, the students in those programs provided more than 60 hours of service each semester. Service activities ranged from tutoring and serving as teacher's aides to working at nursing homes and adult day care centers to recycling, neighborhood improvement and public safety projects.

What was the impact of these efforts in the community? Two major themes stand out.

- First, the work of the students was seen as valuable by the community agencies that the young people worked with.

Ninety percent of the agencies we interviewed reported that the service-learning participants had helped the agency improve services to clients and the community and nearly 70 percent said the use of Learn and Serve participants had increased the agency's capacity to take on new projects.

Where students were involved in providing education-related services (tutoring, student aides, etc.), three-quarters of their service sites reported that the students had helped to raise the skill levels, engagement and self-esteem of the young people being assisted.

Among programs serving elderly citizens or providing health-related services, nearly 65 percent of the agencies interviewed reported that program participants had helped improve the mood, morale and quality of life of elderly residents.

Altogether, nearly all of the agencies reported they would use participants from the program again.

- Second, service learning also was seen as strengthening the relationship between school and community and as promoting a more positive attitude toward young people and schools.

Roughly half of the community agencies we talked with said their participation in service learning had produced new relationships with the public schools, and two-thirds indicated the Learn and Serve projects had fostered a more positive attitude toward the schools.

An even greater number (82 percent) reported the service-learning program had helped to build a more positive attitude toward youth in the community. In at least one community, the service-learning program was credited with helping to build a broad base of support for the public schools.

In dollar terms, the value of the serv-



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ices provided through the programs we studied substantially outweighed the costs of service learning to the community. Based on data from the community agencies, we estimated that the average service-learning student in our study provided more than \$580 in direct services to the community.

Even compared to the cost of the smaller, higher cost programs in our study (which had an average cost of \$149 per student), service learning provided roughly a 4:1 return on investment, with a substantially higher average return (as high as 11:1) for the larger, district-wide programs.

The Bottom Line

The question of cost is only one part of

the decision to adopt service learning in a school or a district.

Among the issues that need to be considered are these: Service learning's perceived effectiveness as an instructional strategy; its capacity to help a school or district address a wide variety of student goals (civic, academic, social or career development); the desire to build stronger ties between school and community; and the readiness of both educators and community members to embrace a more hands-on, experiential approach to learning.

But what is clear from both our research in the Learn and Serve sites and the data from the U.S. Department of Education survey is that cost should not be the major determining factor. Dollar for dollar, service learning is a relatively low-cost strategy for enriching student learning, one that schools across the country are beginning to adopt as an integral part of their school or district approach to education. ■

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