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## Service Learning in an Age of Standards

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# Service Learning in an Age of Standards

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**T**he new standards have to do with application of basic learning. Students take things that at one time they simply memorized and instead take them into real-life settings. The graduation standards offer the opportunity for every student and teacher to bring learning to a higher level. Application, synthesis, analysis and integration of information are what real learning is all about.”

Jim Grimmer, a teacher of philosophy at Richfield High School in Richfield, Minn., articulates one view of the connection between service learning and academic standards. At a time when academic standards, along with assessments and accountability, represent the big-dog reform across the country, educators would do well to follow Grimmer's example in identifying and articulating those connections.

According to the National Dropout Prevention Center's "Special Report on Standards, Assessment, Accountability and Interventions," published in 1999: "States are implementing standards-based reforms in reaction to the failure of past efforts to produce educational environments that ensure high academic

**Whether service  
can survive as a  
useful instructional  
tool may hinge on  
how it is assessed**

achievement for all students.”

National polls consistently show public support for standards, according to Achieve, an independent, bipartisan, not-for-profit organization formed in 1996 by governors and corporate CEOs. The latter share a powerful belief that high academic standards, demanding tests and performance accountability can push schools and students to much higher achievement.

“The basic idea of standards-based reform is to create clear, consistent, challenging goals for student learning, and then to make educational practices more coherent by deliberately using those goals to guide both instruction

and testing. Standards also serve a purpose of communicating to the public what students are expected to know and be able to do at key checkpoints during their education,” according to Achieve's "1999 National Education Summit Briefing Book.”

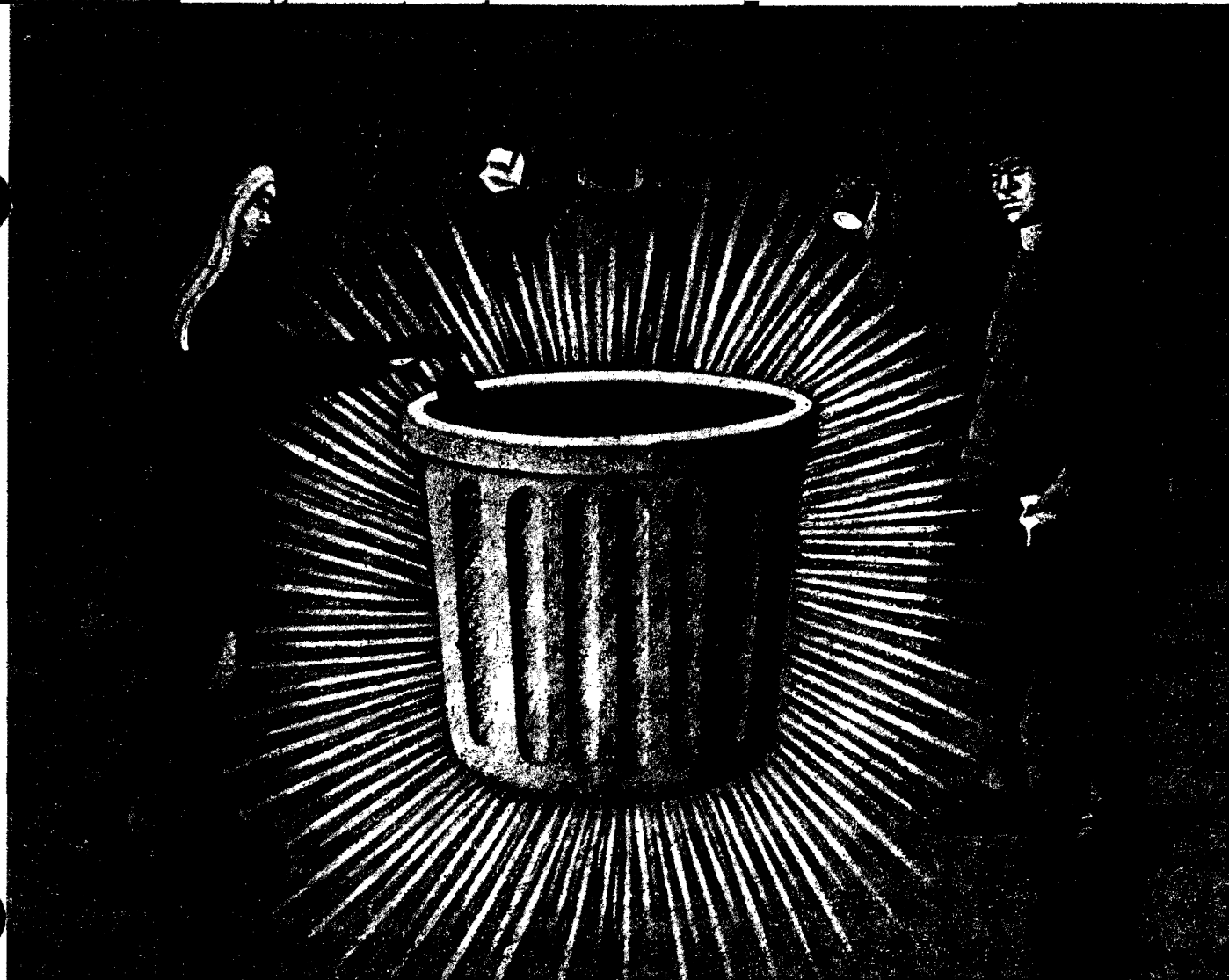
While standards in the abstract have great appeal, implementation really has just begun. A recent Public Agenda study finds that in spite of the fact that 49 states now have what they consider to be tough academic standards for students, little change is evident in teachers' expectations or classroom practices. In this context, where does service learning fit?

#### **A Genuine Priority**

Service learning, as defined by the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993:

- Helps students learn and develop by participating in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of communities;

- Is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education or community-service program and with the community;



- Helps foster civic responsibility;
- Is integrated into and enhances students' academic curriculum or the education components of the community-service program in which the participants are enrolled; and
- Provides structured time for students or other participants to reflect on the service experience.

Several provisions of this definition suggest academic enrichment as a priority, but the fourth provision makes it unambiguous. Viewed another way, standards answer the question, "What do we want students to know and be able to do?" while service learning allows students to demonstrate their knowledge (what we want students to know) through direct service (what we want students to be able to do).

The growing trend to infuse service learning into the K-12 curriculum, schools and communities was documented recently by the National Center for Education Statistics in a March 2000 report, "Youth Service Learning and Community Service Among 6<sup>th</sup>-through 12<sup>th</sup>-Grade Students in the United States: 1996 and 1999."

Among the findings:

- Over the past 10 years, legislative initiatives have galvanized a growing national emphasis on increasing students' involvement with their local communities and linking this service to academic study through service learning.

- Approximately 9 percent of all high schools in 1984 were using at least some service-learning activities. In 1999, 32 percent of all public high schools had service learning.

ment and homework completion.

Service-learning participation was associated with higher scores on the state test of basic skills and higher grades, the studies showed. In addition, 83 percent of schools with service-learning programs reported that grade-point averages of participating students improved 76 percent of the time, according to Joseph Follman, who researched service learning in Florida for the Center for

## "For service-learning proponents, the emphasis on assessment presents special challenges ..."

Evidence suggests that service learning helps students acquire academic skills and knowledge. According to Daniel Weiler and colleagues in their 1998 report, "An Evaluation of K-12 Service Learning in California," students in more than half of the schools they studied with high-quality service learning showed moderate to strong gains on student achievement tests in language arts and/or reading, engagement in school, sense of educational accomplish-

Civic Education and Service, at Florida State University. In addition, middle and high school students who tutored younger children as part of their service-learning programs increased their own grade-point averages and test scores in reading/language arts and mathematics and were less likely to drop out of school, according to another study.

An evaluation of the federally funded Learn and Serve program by Alan Mel-

*continued on page 9*

training, which is critical to realizing the potential of service learning, requires significant resources.

In Philadelphia, we have provided training and follow-up support to more than 1,000 teachers during the past few years, and we have plans to train 5,000 more. After two years of partnering with the National Youth Leadership Council and other outside training providers, we now have the internal capacity with our own teachers and administrators to deliver high-quality service-learning training.

### Encouraging Gains

Our work in the service-learning field gets wider and deeper. Just as we have demonstrated the effectiveness of work-based learning as a vehicle to improve attendance, grades and standardized test scores, we soon will turn to an outside evaluator to test the power of systemic service learning using a range of academic and attitudinal measurements.

Teachers using service-learning strategies with their students report that discipline problems have dropped and interest in learning has skyrocketed. Over the past four years, achievement of Philadelphia's students, measured by the SAT-9, in reading, mathematics and science, has gone up by 40 percent. These teachers are certain that service learning provides a context for students to make meaning of the world in which they live and to feel like their place in this world is valued.

On a personal note, many teachers like Kathy Lee speak of feeling inspired, passionate and reminded of why they became educators. As Harvard Professor Cornel West said recently during a visit to Philadelphia, our collective challenge is to cultivate in young people "the passion to know and the courage to love." This objective is identical to the goals of service learning and fits squarely with the academic standards movement.

David Hornbeck is resigning this month after six years as superintendent of Philadelphia Public Schools, Parkway at 21<sup>st</sup> Street, Philadelphia, Pa. 19103.  
E-mail: hornbeck@phila.k12.pa.us

*continued from page 7*

chior at Brandeis University found that well-designed service-learning programs had a positive impact on students' academic performance. In his study of service programs at 17 middle and high schools nationwide, students showed gains in attitude toward school and improved marks in mathematics, science and overall grade point average.

### Content Standards

We have seen that service learning can add great value to the collaborative culture of a school and to its students' ability to achieve academically. But like many other promising practices that engage students in school and fire the imagination of teachers and young people, service learning falls into a gray area that is puzzling for policymakers. It is useful to take a close look at each of the three legs on which states' current education priorities rest—standards plus assessment and accountability.

Each state's particular history, culture and present circumstances, of course, play the largest role in what can be seen at first glance. These help to explain how much emphasis is placed on academic standards, how much direction and detail are provided by the state and how extensive are the consequences tied to performance on state tests and accountability mechanisms.

Similarly, the fit of service learning in this context of standards is a bit different from one state to the next. Even so, some ideas are sufficiently common across states that generalizations can be made.

### A State Policy View

State leaders look back on the adoption of standards as a difficult and sometimes painful exercise that they will not wish to revisit soon. So after a decade of change and uncertainty about goals and expectations, it seems likely that most states will stick with the standards in place today for at least the next few years.

By and large, legislators, governors and state board members have checked off the task of standards development. One need look no further than the follow-up from the governors' most recent education summit to see that policymakers are on to the next challenge. For most, that challenge will be either assessment or accountability.

Within the language of a state's standards, service learning occasionally is referenced directly, as is the case in Indi-

ana. But strong support for the idea can also be found in the underlying principles that accompany a state's academic standards, as in Maine, or in legislation establishing the context for standards, as is the case in South Carolina (see related story, page 11).

Even where the standards themselves are silent about service learning, a tremendous opportunity exists in the questions that state leaders are asking. Those who have wagered substantial political and financial capital on the standards are beginning, for instance, to wonder where their state will find the tools that local schools and districts can use to achieve standards. Given the growing research base on service learning, it could well become seen as a viable tool by policy leaders.

### Assessment Questions

The noise and heat that surrounded development of the standards in some states now has shifted, in synch with policymakers' attention, to the means by which standards will be measured—the assessments. Across the country we're seeing the sort of wrestling over control and autonomy that characterized the policy debates about standards in the early to mid-1990s.

Beyond triggering the recurring debates that are part of American public life (conservative vs. liberal values or fear of government interference, for instance), assessments produce their own anxiety. Perhaps for some that balk at the increase in testing, the standards weren't quite real until assessments were put in place. For others, the match between the standards and the assessments is suspect. For many, the enormously technical, complicated and confidential processes of assessment are worrisome.

Policymakers are likely learning more than they ever wanted to know about statewide testing, and what seemed like a straightforward idea probably does not seem quite as simple as it did a few years back. They are themselves raising questions about the purposes of the assessments and the kinds of information various measures are expected to produce and what other information can be used to create a reasonably accurate picture of progress among students, schools and districts.

For service-learning proponents, the emphasis on assessment presents special challenges, including these:

- *The definition of service-learning success varies widely.*

For some schools, success is achieved



A youth paints a mural for the Village of Arts and Humanities project in Philadelphia, which collaborates with schools on service activities.

simply by providing an opportunity for students to volunteer. Elsewhere, students are expected to demonstrate a range of achievements gained through their service experiences, so a whole range of academic disciplines are plumbed in the course of community-service activities.

● *Credible assessment of the quality and impact of service learning is in its infancy.*

The National Service Learning and Assessment Study Group completed in 1999 a "Service Learning and Assessment Field Guide for Teachers," which identifies specific assessment processes, tools and protocols to "help teachers move away from traditional learning and assessment practices toward authentic assessment, standards-based education, development of critical thinking skills and social responsibility—practices in line with current trends in research and education reform."

● *Tracking causal effects is difficult, intrusive and expensive.*

This is especially true when dealing with highly complex activities on a school-by-school or district-by-district basis. Determining whether a change in reading or math or science achievement is related to students' service-learning activity can easily cost more than the service-learning program itself.

### Accounting For Results

States in the early stages of implementing accountability systems are scrambling to ensure that schools pay close attention to what will be tested and measured. Policymakers in these states are trying to answer the question, "What are the consequences for students, schools and districts that cannot improve?"

Although many of the heated debates during the past year appear to have focused on assessment, they are at heart more tangled up in accountability or how the test scores will be used.

Again, those who wish to increase the quality and quantity of service-learning practice will need to address some specific challenges.

Service learning is sometimes viewed as a desirable activity with its own rewards, not as a means to improve student performance on measures of highest priority to districts and states. Without state-specific information, countering this view is very difficult.

Also, service learning can be seen as an add-on when framed as an area of curriculum rather than as an instructional delivery method. What is added on is easily lopped off when a school or district experiences anxiety over low performance.

In addition, state education agencies administering service-learning programs generally collect examples of good practice and are in touch with individuals who can provide professional development on service learning, along with written materials such as lesson plans, reflections and student work based on service experiences. Helpful though this is to those who have close connections with agency staff, rarely are these success stories available to state policy leaders or explicitly tied to how well service learning helps address student achievement in core disciplines.

In this era where standards are the linchpin of state education reforms, it seems certain that schools and districts will pay closest attention to the priori-

ties and practices specifically addressed in the standards. There's little doubt that local school systems will be even more attentive to what gets assessed. And initiatives to improve those indicators for which the system itself is held accountable will surely receive the lion's share of resources, support and verbiage.

A productive course of action is to determine exactly what state policies are in place today and the general thrust of new policy developments around standards, assessment and accountability. It then becomes possible to identify the questions for which service learning may be policymakers' answer.

### Possible Disconnections

Clearly, standards and service learning can be implemented in ways that enrich both fields. However, we see some disconnections emerging over the next several years.

Expect, for example, a diminishment of political will around service learning if policymakers perceive schools as being forced to choose between school service programs and high test scores. It is also possible that the richness of service learning may become reduced with a strict alignment to standards—a potentially greater threat in schools and districts where sanctions against adults kick in if overall performance is not satisfactory.

Demonstrating a track record of service-learning success becomes possible as practice matures and better data is made available. Service learning is a vibrant pedagogy that allows students to achieve civic, social, career and personal outcomes. The fact that these may not be captured by standardized measures simply means that other ways to report on success are needed. It will be crucial to ensure that a rich and varied track record of success is created and incorporated into public reports.

Another potential disconnect for service-learning alignment with standards is similar to any other differentiated pedagogy: Teachers' efforts focus on new learning outcomes without an orientation to new or different teaching strategies. How many more students would achieve standards if their teachers had access to high-quality professional development to improve important teaching content and skills along with the in-service programs on how to administer the state test?

Service learning in its richest and most robust form challenges traditional ideas about schooling. It requires a focus on learning outcomes, time and place of

teaching as well as a school climate and culture that accommodates student voice, student contribution, active learning and enhanced school-community partnerships. Standards, on the other hand, often draw on a more traditional definition of schooling, one that assumes that academic achievement and success in a specific discipline are synonymous.

Finally, deepening the quality and increasing the scope of service learning in schools are essential, and standards may be just the ticket to help drive better integration of service and curriculum. Young people cannot afford to put their academic growth on hold for programs that are merely a sidebar or an outside activity that bears little relationship to the central activities of school. Demonstrating success on academic standards has to become a top priority for service learning.

### Paths for Progress

It is important to understand the standards policy context of your state in order to determine how to move forward in a way that also leads to good service learning. We think there are two good ways to make service learning progress in a standards-based world.

First, if language hospitable to service learning is already in the state's standards or part of a broader education reform package, make sure it doesn't get lost in the implementation frenzy. If it was important enough for policymakers to include it, it is important enough to be measured and to matter when results are reported.

Second, even if there's no hint of service learning in the state's standards, make sure that educators, policy leaders and community members understand that service learning is a great way to achieve the standards. ■



Terry Pickeral and Judy Bray

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## States Fostering Service

Several states infuse service learning into the curriculum to provide students with high-quality opportunities to acquire academic knowledge and skills. Examples of different approaches are provided below.

We do not think it is coincidental that those states exhibiting sterling service-learning practice are also states where policymakers' attention has embraced service learning.

In Indiana, state legislation allows public schools to offer service learning for high school credit toward graduation.

Each school corporation may encourage the development of a community-service ethic among high school students in grade 11 or 12 by offering the program as part of the district's elective curriculum and in compliance with rules adopted by the local school board.

By completing the approved community service or other volunteer service, the student earns academic credit toward the minimum graduation requirements.

(For more details, contact Will Morgan at 812-856-4677 or [wdmorgan@indiana.edu](mailto:wdmorgan@indiana.edu).)

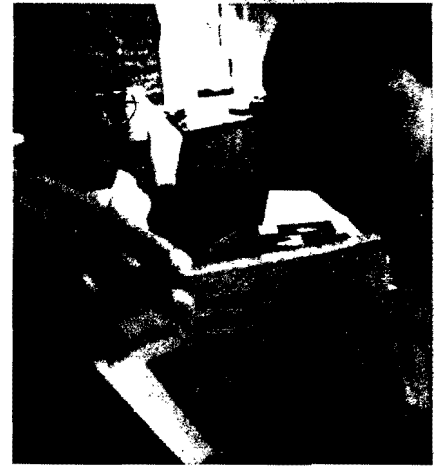
In Maine, the state's academic standards, known as Learning Results, are preceded by six guiding principles. One of these asserts that every student will leave school a responsible and involved citizen, who:

- recognizes the power of personal participation to affect the community and demonstrates participation skills;
- understands the importance of accepting responsibility for personal decisions and actions;
- knows the means of achieving personal and community health and well-being; and
- recognizes and understands the diverse nature of society.

(For more details, contact Heidi McGinley at 207-287-5986 or [heidi.mcginley@state.me.us](mailto:heidi.mcginley@state.me.us).)

In South Carolina, service learning has been integrated into the three largest pieces of state education legislation this decade:

The School to Work Act (1994) specifically mentions service learning and structured work-based learning as one methodology teachers can



A student receives tutoring in reading as part of a service-learning initiative organized by the Corporation for National Service.

use in preparing students for the world of work.

The Early Childhood Development and Academic Assistance Act (1994) calls for every school to develop a school renewal plan and each district to develop a district strategic plan. Service learning is included in these plans across the state.

The Education Accountability Act (1998) establishes grants to help implement "a modified year or day that provides the following: more time for student learning, learning opportunities that typically are not available in the regular student day."

(For more details, contact Karen Horne at 803-253-7636 or [khorne@sde.state.sc.us](mailto:khorne@sde.state.sc.us).)

Across the country, schools and districts are beginning to demonstrate the connections between service learning and standards, too. For example, at Field Middle School in Northbrook, Ill., 6<sup>th</sup>-graders learn about and apply recycling processes in their school, homes and community; 7<sup>th</sup>-graders investigate issues facing senior citizens and videotape their oral histories; and 8<sup>th</sup>-graders investigate issues facing the homeless and serve at the local homeless center.

All these service-learning activities are aligned with specific Illinois academic standards.

(For more details, contact Barbara Kurth at 847-272-6884 or [bkurth@dist31.k12.il.us](mailto:bkurth@dist31.k12.il.us).)

— Terry Pickeral and Judy Bray