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Community Service-Learning  
Commitment through Active Citizenship

Rohima C. Wade

Anita, Marlene, Liza, and David are committed to empowering their students to work for community improvement and social justice through projects that focus on environmental protection, the isolation of senior citizens, the needs of the homeless, and animal rights. Each Friday, David’s fourth-grade class cares for the animals at the local animal shelter and publicizes animal rights issues in the community. Liza’s third-graders bake and deliver bread every month to the local soup kitchen. Marlene’s fifth-graders are creating a Vaudeville Show using songs they are learning from the residents of a local retirement residence. Anita’s sixth-graders are working to reestablish a prairie in a nearby park. They, like many other teachers from suburbs and cities nationwide, believe that the social studies’ professed goal of active citizenship is best developed not just through reading a textbook but also through practical, hands-on experiences in which students identify community needs, develop action plans, and put their ideas into practice. Their students are developing firsthand knowledge about what it means to make a difference; at the same time they are learning valuable personal, social, and academic skills.

While community service is a long standing tradition in American society, the more recent idea of community service-learning — integrating meaningful service to one’s school or community with academic learning and structured reflection (Cairn & Kielmeier, 1991) — has engendered great interest in the educational arena. A number of studies and reports on educational change have called for youth service initiatives (Boyer, 1983; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Goodlad, 1984; Harrison, 1986). These appeals have been supported by millions of dollars of federal funding for service-learning programs nationwide (Commission on National and Community Service, 1993). Research on community service-learning has revealed many potential benefits for students, including increased self-esteem and self-efficacy, enhanced motivation and interest in school, and greater academic achievement and social responsibility (Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Wade, 1993).

While many educators are recognizing the benefits of community service-learning, both preservice and inservice teachers are concerned about the “how-to’s” of planning an effective service-learning project that meets both community needs and curriculum objectives. The following recommendations are based on service-learning curricula as well as the experiences of over fifty teachers in our local school district’s service-learning program.

Getting Started

In beginning a service-learning project, three tasks are essential: deciding on a community need or problem, choosing a service project, and developing a plan for integrating the service with curricular goals and objectives.

Identifying a Problem

The best service-learning projects involve ideas not only from the teacher and students, but input from the local community as well. Here are some of the many ways to identify a community need or problem with students:

- Conduct a survey in the community, local neighborhood, or school.
- Telephone local service providers or invite them to class to speak with students.
- Have students develop a vision of an ideal community or world and then discuss what would need to be changed to make their visions a reality.
- Read the local newspapers and cut out articles on community problems.
- Look through the Yellow Pages
for agencies that focus on social and environmental issues.

- Have students attend city council, school board, or United Way meetings and return to class with ideas to discuss.
- Have students identify personal skills, talents, knowledge, or hobbies that might be used to help others.
- Talk to senior citizens or homeless people about both needs and project ideas. If possible, find a way to include service recipients in the project from the beginning to its completion.

Choosing the Project

After deciding on a problem or need, the next step is to choose a service-learning project. Ideally, service projects will be more than one-time events. Projects that are carried out over a few months or the entire school year are more likely to lead to students' long-term commitment to work for social and environmental change in their communities.

After the class has chosen a need or a problem, brainstorm ideas for projects. If there are specific limits in terms of time, transportation, or funding, specify these at the beginning. Also consider the ages and skills of the students and how much outside help or resources projects will involve. Ideas for many excellent service projects can be found in the curriculum resources listed at the end of this article. Encourage students to work toward consensus on a project idea, or, if need be, to vote on a project to which they can all contribute.

Integrating Service with Academics

Most elementary teachers teach a variety of subjects. These are just a few of the many ways community service-learning can be integrated within the elementary curriculum.

- Social Studies -- Discuss with your students the role of civic participation in the social studies. Community activities may involve geography and map skills or learning about local history through interviewing senior citizens, developing a tour guide for historic sites, or renovating an old building.

- Reading & Language Arts -- Surveys, interviews, and questionnaires involve both writing and communication skills. Students may engage in library research on the service topic or read children's books on the service theme. They may want to share what they have learned and accomplished through writing plays or reports.

- Math -- If your service project involves fundraising or needed supplies, students can keep a record of monies raised or spent. Building projects can make use of measurement and computational skills. Information students learn about the service theme can be represented in charts and diagrams.

- Science -- Environmental projects are often compatible with curricular objectives in science. Students can conduct experiments on the quality of local water sources or learn about local birds and trees to create plans for a bird sanctuary. Creating a butterfly garden at a local nursing home or developing a nature trail in an infrequently used park are also opportunities to combine science and service.

Reflecting on Service

As students engage in the service project and related academic tasks, it is important for them to reflect on what they are learning about themselves, others, and the act of serving. Students can engage in reflection through journal writing, drawing, discussion, public speaking, creating a photo essay, or writing a newspaper article on the project. The following questions can be used to foster student reflection.

- How is the service-learning project going?
- What is working? What would you like to change?
- What problems have you encountered and what have you done to try to resolve them?
- What have you learned about
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empowerment and commitment to social change, community service-learning is well worth the effort.

Curriculum Resources on Community Service-Learning


References


About the Author

Rahima C. Wade is Assistant Professor of Elementary Social Studies at the University of Iowa. She is coordinator of a Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education sponsored community service-learning grant. The grant involves preservice training in service-learning in collaboration with the Iowa Department of Education funded Iowa City Community School District Service-Learning Program.
Table 1. Service-Learning Planning Checklist

Does your service-learning plan include:

- an important community need
- input from students
- input from community members
- clear service and learning goals
- integration of service with academic skills and content
- clarification of the responsibilities of all those involved
- opportunities for young people to engage in critical thinking, creative problem solving, and decision making
- participants and contributions from many cultures
- opportunities to reflect on the service, one's role in serving, and the larger societal issues involved
- developmentally appropriate activities for students
- student initiative and active involvement
- teamwork and collaboration
- assistance from others
- a timeline including plans for evaluation of student learning
- a list of needed materials, supplies, or transportation

Editor's Note

The signing of the National and Community Service Trust Act last year targets millions of dollars in federal funds for school-based service-learning. Grants should begin to support school projects as early as this summer. For regulations and further information contact: Eli Segal, Chief Executive Officer, Corporation for National and Community Service, 10th floor, 1100 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20525, (202) 606-5000.