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Rahima C. Wade

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### Recommended Citation

Wade, Rahima C., "Community Service-Learning Commitment through Active Citizenship" (1994). *Special Topics, General*. 112.

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## Community Service-Learning *Commitment through Active Citizenship*

Rahima C. Wade

**A**nita, 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 & Kielsmeier, 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

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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.

### *Inviting Collaboration*

The most effective service-learning projects are usually partnerships between teachers, students, and community members. Students should not be just doing good for others; instead, students should work alongside community members and service recipients for mutual empowerment. Think about

who are the best people to involve in the project. Which agencies in the community work on the identified need or problem? Can parents, other teachers, or college practicum students be involved? If additional funding is necessary, local businesses or the school P.T.A. may be sources of support. Contact your state department of education to find out who is your state coordinator for federal community service-funding. Finally, think about ways to involve the recipients of the service project so that they can become more empowered in identifying or meeting their needs.

When working with a number of individuals on a service-learning activity, clarify the responsibilities of all those involved. Who will be responsible for collecting supplies or supervising students on community field trips? Who will provide orientation for students and others on needed skills and information to complete the service project? How can students be empowered to be responsible for themselves and their learning in connection with the service activities?

### *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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others through this project?

• What have you learned about yourself through this project?

• How is this project similar to or different than what you expected?

• What larger social, environmental, or political issues are represented in this project?

• What would you like to share with others about this project?

• What would be an effective way to share what you have learned?

Reflection is also an important task for the teacher. The checklist in Table 1 can be used in reflecting on the essential components of a service-learning project.

### Celebrating Service

Although the principal intent of a service-learning project is to meet others' needs in the community, it is important to take some time to celebrate the students' collective efforts. Teachers can recognize students' contributions through certificates, ribbons, a popcorn party, pizza, or an extra recess. Celebrating service reinforces to students that in addition to benefiting others, service contributes to personal fulfillment and enjoyment.

### Conclusion

Effective service-learning projects involve identifying an appropriate need or problem, choosing a suitable project, integrating the service with academic skills, guiding students in reflection, and celebrating service. While planning service-learning projects takes time and energy, teachers' efforts are rewarded in knowing that they are making a difference for their communities and their students. Students note that "It's fun helping other people" and that "I can enjoy service more than I think." For students who value students' motivation to learn as well as their

empowerment and commitment to social change, community service-learning is well worth the effort.

### Curriculum Resources on Community Service-Learning

- Cairn, R. W., & Coble, T. (1993). *Learning by giving: The K-8 service learning curriculum guide*. Roseville, MN: National Youth Leadership Council\*
- Cairn, R. W., & Kielsmeier, J. C. (Eds.). (1991). *Growing hope: A sourcebook on integrating youth service into the school curriculum*. Roseville, MN: National Youth Leadership Council.\*
- Lewis, B. A. (1991). *The kid's guide to social action*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.
- Maryland Student Service Alliance. (1992). *The courage to care. The strength to serve. Draft instructional framework in service-learning for elementary schools and middle schools*. Baltimore: Author. Available from Maryland Student Service Alliance, 200 West Baltimore Street, Baltimore, MD 21201.
- Novelli, J., & Chayet, B. (1991). *The kids care book: 50 class projects that help kids help others*. NY: Scholastic Professional Books.
- Springfield Public Schools. (1991). *Whole learning through service: A guide for integrating service into the curriculum kindergarten through eighth grade*. Springfield: Author. Available from the Community Service Learning Center, 258 Washington Blvd. Springfield, MA 01108.

\* The National Youth Leadership Council is a national clearinghouse for service-learning in K-12 schooling. You can contact them at: 1910 West Country Road B, St. Paul, MN 55113 or telephone: 612-631-3672.

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### 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.*