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Talk It Up: Advocating for Service-Learning

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TALK IT UP

ADVOCATING FOR SERVICE-LEARNING

ISSUE SIX

Making powerful allies for service-learning is one of the founding purposes of the National Service-Learning Partnership. This month's *Talk It Up* is the sixth in a year-long series to help Partnership members advocate effectively for service-learning. In earlier issues, a varied group of service-learning supporters shared their perspectives and advice. We hope the series will support an exchange of knowledge and provide a 360-degree review of the many issues at stake in promoting service-learning.

—Anthony Welch, chair of the National Service-Learning Partnership Board of Directors

BACK TO SCHOOL, BACK TO SERVICE

By Cameron Dary

The month after classes begin can be the busiest time of the school year. Students and teachers are settling into their schedules, and it seems as if every group—from the parent teacher organization to student club—holds its first meetings. Because these events help decide the year's agenda for important decision-makers, this hectic "back-to-school" period can be a great time to promote your service-learning efforts.

I've been part of back-to-school advocacy for service-learning as an elementary, middle, and high school student in Waupun, Wisconsin. I got involved because my mother started a service-learning program at the elementary school where she taught. She attended a national training through Do Something, the national youth leadership organization. The next year, I wrote a proposal to the Wisconsin State Department of Public Instruction and received a minigrant to start Do Something at my middle school. Later I also served as a member of the National Commission on Service-Learning, chaired by Senator John Glenn.

The first weeks of the school year were important to our program's success and provided a great opportunity to advocate for service-learning. Getting our school interested was the hardest part of our service-learning work. Research shows that people are more likely respond to information from someone they know than from any other source. Our early work helped us form a core group of supporters who could spread the word. We then used every type of publicity and many different back-to-school gatherings to share information about service-learning and get more people involved.

Here are four actions we took that can help strengthen service-learning at your school:

1 Let young people lead your core group. As you're planning back-to-school advocacy work, talk with students first. They are your most persuasive supporters. Young people were the key leaders for our advocacy efforts. Our teachers helped us plan and assign tasks ranging from outreach to fundraising to writing letters to the city council. In preparing our activities, we started with a small group of already-active students and expanded the group in the fall. Everyone invited their friends, and soon the whole school was involved.

Other adults played a large role, too—and young people took the lead in making sure they took part. We wrote letters to parents over the summer so that they would be willing to volunteer in the fall. Teachers got involved because their students persuaded them that service-learning was important. Sometimes teachers are less critical of young people's opinions than they are of other teachers' ideas. They think, "If this program has really motivated students, then it must be a good thing."

Giving young people ownership connects your advocacy efforts to a youth empowerment emphasis, which is the best part of service-learning. For many people in our group, participating was the first time they had a leadership role at our school. I learned from my National Commission service how young people could work with adults on an important project. If I could be a leader in a group with former governors and U.S. senators, then students can be leaders at your school.

2 Make sure your service-learning program is visible at your school. Use publicity to make people curious about service-learning. One of the biggest barriers to getting involved is that people don't understand what service-learning is, and at first, it doesn't seem like the cool thing to do. We used every chance to raise service-learning's visibility at our school. Young people went from classroom to classroom during homeroom; we made announcements to the whole school over the public address system; and a class produced short public service announcements that played over the school's television system. We also used posters. Schools have posters to publicize dances—why not for service-learning? Our posters were made by hand to be big and colorful. Make sure your materials seem new and different. If they blend in with the rest of the bulletin board postings, then people will ignore them.

All of our efforts were designed to create a core group of supporters who could spread the word in back-to-school meetings.

3 Share your message at every possible meeting. Get on the agenda of every group in your school or community that meets in September. In the first weeks of school, we met with the parent's council, school board, and city council, and we visited local community groups, such as the Rotary Club. You can visit any of these groups all year, but back-to-school meetings are times when many school groups set their goals and organize important activities. None of the meetings we attended planned to discuss serv-

ice-learning, but our presence ensured that service-learning was on the agenda. Our school counselors helped with the schedule, and young people led the presentations. Some of the groups we spoke with weren't initially supportive. They thought that service-learning took time away from classroom learning. Our message was, you don't have to be sitting in a desk to learn.

4 Hold an introductory event—and make sure to include reflection. Use a service-learning event to bring together past participants and to involve new people. As part of Do Something's program, our year began with a "speak-out" to let young people decide on the issues that mattered to them and begin planning their service-learning projects. This event was important to build energy for the year's activities and to introduce important parts of the service-learning process, such as reflection. We held our speak-out after school in late September and invited students from every grade to take part, and about 150 attended. It's important to hold meetings at a time when young people can come. Sometimes our counselors set up meetings during afternoon sports practices or at times that weren't convenient for parents. Part of good advocacy is figuring out places and times when it's easy for people to hear your message.

Take advantage of the opportunities for advocacy that the back-to-school time provides. Bring together people who are passionate about service-learning and engage your whole school. Don't wait until the school year is underway and things "calm down." The first few weeks are crucial to getting people involved.

CAMERON DARY is entering tenth grade at Waupun High School in Waupun, Wisconsin. He was the only K-12 student member of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation-sponsored National Commission on Service-Learning and is a member of the Partnership's W. K. Kellogg Foundation Youth Innovation Fund for Youth-Directed Civic Action National Advisory Council. Do Something's program model will be featured in Harvard professor Robert Putnam's follow-up book to *Bowling Alone*, to be published in September 2003.

To order the National Commission on Service-Learning's final report, *Learning In Deed: The Power of Service-Learning in American Schools* or the associated videos, call 1-800-819-9997.

¹ Keller, Ed and Jon Berry. *The Influentials*. New York: Free Press, 2003. The Roper ASW market research firm has found that word-of-mouth recommendations are crucial in Americans' decision-making. Ten percent of Americans are more apt to be listened to than the rest of the population, and Roper identifies these people as "Influentials." You can find out more at <http://www.roperasw.com>.