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Fulfilling Our Civic Mission: Service-Learning in Massachusetts

Community Service Learning Advisory Council

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Fulfilling Our Civic Mission: Service-Learning in Massachusetts

Over the past twenty years, service-learning – the involvement of students in community service linked to classroom learning – has become an increasingly common component of schooling in Massachusetts and across the nation. Nationally, nearly a third of all public schools and half of all high schools report the use of service-learning in classrooms, up from less than 10% in 1984. In Massachusetts, the 2001-2002 survey of school districts discussed in this document points to a similar level of service-learning activity, with more than a third of all school districts reporting the use of service-learning in classrooms.

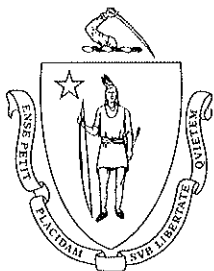
Executive Summary

Service-learning has grown over the past decade for a number of reasons. For many educators, parents, and civic leaders, service-learning is seen as a way of strengthening the civic mission of schools and, in the words of the federal legislation supporting service-learning, of “renew[ing] the ethic of civic responsibility and the spirit of community” across the United States. For others, service-learning provides a means of deepening classroom learning by providing critical opportunities for young people to apply their learning in real-world settings. Service-learning offers young people needed developmental experiences, providing them with the opportunity to take responsibility for others, work closely with adults, and see themselves as positive contributors to their communities. At the same time, service-learning programs in schools create new links between schools and the community, often leading to new partnerships, stronger communities and renewed support for the public schools.

Massachusetts was an early leader in the field of service-learning in the 1980s. In fact, the federal legislation drafted by Senator Edward M. Kennedy that led to the creation of the Commission for National and Community Service in 1990, was modeled on practice in Springfield, Massachusetts. The 2001–2002 survey of school districts discussed in this document, however, reveals that *while the use of service-learning as a teaching strategy in Massachusetts schools is growing, the infrastructure for supporting practice excellence and integration has not kept pace.* This is one of the major findings that emerged through survey results of 119 of the 350 school districts. Other findings include:

- Service-learning is most often encouraged as a practice in order to enhance students’ sense of civic responsibility and foster positive relationships with the community.
- Service-learning is most widespread in schools and districts where there is policy and administrative support.
- Barriers to improving and expanding the practice of service-learning include lack of funding, teacher overload, and limited professional development.

The goal of this report is to provide a set of recommendations, based on the past ten years of experience in the field, that will enable Massachusetts to take positive next steps in capitalizing on the potential of service-learning for all students. Based on the responses of school districts in Massachusetts, the CSL Advisory Council makes the following four recommendations:



RECOMMENDATION 1: State and local leaders need to provide the necessary leadership, policy support and public advocacy for service-learning as a means of accomplishing the state's civic and academic goals for youth.

Executive and Legislative

- *Establish a Legislative Commission on Service and the Civic Mission of Schools to develop policy recommendations to promote service-learning and civic education as an integral part of public education.*
- In partnership with the Massachusetts Service Alliance, issue an executive order requiring state agencies to integrate volunteer service and service-learning into their public programs and encouraging their cooperation with schools in developing service-learning opportunities for students.
- Publicly support service-learning in speeches, public appearances, and visits to service-learning programs.

"You need role models. From the governor, to state board of education chair, to university presidents, to the Commissioner of Education modeling it and talking about it."

FROM THE MASSACHUSETTS ADMINISTRATOR'S FOCUS GROUP ON SERVICE-LEARNING.

Massachusetts Board of Education/Department of Education

- *Develop and pass a policy statement supporting service-learning as a means of accomplishing the state's civic and academic education goals.*
- *Establish an internal working group to identify ways of integrating service-learning into DOE-funded programs and initiatives, including integration into curriculum frameworks, professional development, RFP/grant language, etc.*
- Develop and implement a strategy for increasing awareness of service-learning among district-level policy makers, administrators, and teachers (for example, publications, videos, conference sessions, etc.).
- Sponsor a high-level conference on service-learning for school administrators.
- Create a "Leadership in Service-Learning Recognition Program" for schools, administrators, teachers and students.

Local Educational Leadership (School Committees/Superintendents)

- *Establish a local service-learning advisory group or task force that includes school committee members, district and building administrators, teachers, parents, community partners and students to identify methods of providing policy and infrastructure support for service-learning.*
- Develop and endorse district policy statements supporting service-learning as an effective means of addressing civic and academic goals.
- Integrate service-learning into district operating policies, including hiring, promotion, teacher training and orientation, transportation, liability, and other policies that can promote and/or serve as barriers to service-learning.

RECOMMENDATION 2: State and local leaders need to increase resources available to support service-learning.

Governor, Department of Education, Legislative Leadership

- *Restore and increase the service-learning line item in the state budget with a target of \$3 million/year to provide additional resources to help districts start or expand service-learning programs.*
- Provide additional technical support staff at the Department of Education to assist districts in implementing effective practices.
- Identify service-learning as an effective and allowable strategy in Department of Education sponsored grant programs.
- Pursue private, state and federal resources for service-learning programs.

Local Educational Leadership

- *Allocate local education funds to support service-learning through mini-grant and other programs.*
- Establish policies granting service-learning programs equal priority in requests for district resources (for example, access to buses).

“Money is important to get it started.”

FROM THE MASSACHUSETTS ADMINISTRATOR'S FOCUS GROUP ON SERVICE-LEARNING.

RECOMMENDATION 3: State and local leaders need to increase professional support and resources for service-learning.

Massachusetts Board of Education/Department of Education

- *Integrate service-learning into state professional development plans, including state-approved professional development and recertification programs.*
- *Work with Massachusetts teacher education programs to ensure that service-learning becomes part of the regular pre-service teacher education curriculum.*
- Establish a resource center or clearinghouse that collects and provides information on service-learning for Massachusetts teachers and administrators
- Establish and support an in-state professional development center on service-learning.
- Encourage all DOE programs and departments to include service-learning in the training and professional development they provide.
- Identify and highlight models of effective practice and systemic integration that receive resources to mentor districts seeking to develop their service-learning practices.
- Provide training for administrators.

Local Educational Leadership

- *Establish one or more service-learning coordinator positions to provide technical assistance, training and leadership for local service-learning programs.*
- Establish service-learning as an integral element in the district's professional development program

“To make this more powerful for school systems out there it has to be something that you are assessed on.”

FROM THE MASSACHUSETTS ADMINISTRATOR'S FOCUS GROUP ON SERVICE-LEARNING.

The Community Service-Learning Advisory Council

The Community Service-Learning Advisory Council was established in October of 2000 to review, advise, and make recommendations on state service-learning programs and policies to promote academically meaningful, sustained, and high quality service-learning experiences throughout students' schooling. In this capacity, the Council will serve as a resource to both the Board of Education and the Department of Education in Massachusetts

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RECOMMENDATION 4: The Massachusetts Department of Education needs to establish a system to collect data on and evaluate service-learning programs.

Massachusetts Board of Education/Department of Education

- *Build measures of service-learning activity into district reporting and district report cards on the Department's website.*
- Encourage service-learning and service activity as an item on standard state transcript and individual record reporting.
- Provide funding for evaluation of local service-learning grantees and programs at least once every 5 years.
- Develop a Massachusetts service-learning evaluation toolkit with resources for local practitioners to use in assessing their programs.

Local Educational Leadership

- *Require building administrators to include data on service-learning activities as part of the annual school reporting process.*
- Establish mechanisms for tracking/counting local service-learning activities.
- Seek funds for and support local evaluation efforts aimed at documenting the district's service-learning activities and impacts.
- Require the use of civics and service portfolios as part of the graduation requirement.

Without expanded support for service-learning statewide, Massachusetts risks the loss of the gains that were made throughout the 1990s. Establishing service-learning as an important element in state education policy and funding has the potential to enable all students to graduate with a greater depth of academic knowledge, a firmer commitment to serving others and their community, and a stronger sense of civic engagement and commitment. The dividends provided by a renewed commitment to the integration of service-learning are many. Not only will this improve the education of children in the Commonwealth, but it will help create a better Commonwealth for our children.

For a copy of the full report please contact Kristen McKinnon, Community Service-Learning Specialist, Massachusetts Department of Education, at kmckinnon@doe.mass.edu or 781-338-6306.