2001

Lessons Learned About Service-Learning: Voices of Experience About Urban Service-Learning in Saint Paul Public Schools

Saint Paul Public Schools

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LESSONS LEARNED
ABOUT SERVICE-LEARNING

Voices of Experience About Urban Service-Learning in Saint Paul Public Schools
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This publication is made possible through the work of the Saint Paul Public Schools, the National Youth Leadership Council and the American Association of School Administrators, through a program called Opening School House Doors. The program was funded by a grant from the Learn and Serve America Program of the Corporation for National Service (No. 97GVA011). Opinions or points of view expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Corporation or Learn and Serve America.
Preface from Superintendent Patricia A. Harvey

Introduction

Lessons learned about what it's like to learn this way:
Service-learning makes school more fun, more interesting, and more meaningful.

Lessons learned about preparation:
It is worth the time it takes for students to build community partnerships, research essential knowledge, gain critical skills, and understand their roles as a team.

Lessons learned about action:
The action is where the learning from the preparation stage comes together with service to strengthen communities and generate even more learning.

Lessons learned about reflection:
Reflection activities that require higher-order thinking skills need to be done consistently throughout the different stages of the process.

Lessons learned about celebration:
The best celebration takes advantage of big and little opportunities to recognize all partners.

Lessons learned about the process of doing service-learning:
The process of doing service-learning is more important than the product.

Lessons learned about youth voice and youth leadership:
Student ownership translates into educational excellence.

Lessons learned about collaboration:
Effective service-learning partnerships draw schools back into the community and the community back into schools.

Lessons learned about intergenerational partnerships:
Because senior volunteers and students are co-learners and co-teachers, intergenerational service-learning adds depth and wisdom to the process and to the product.

Lessons learned about parent involvement:
Service-learning can increase parent involvement, but it takes work . . . and is worth it.

Lessons learned about collaboration with volunteers:
Volunteers deserve great ongoing training, support, and relationship building that is as significant to them as they are to the project.

Lessons learned about collaboration within the schools:
Internal collaboration can overcome the obstacles within schools that sometimes make service-learning feel impossible.

Lessons learned about meeting real community needs:
All partners — but especially students — must clearly understand how the project meets a genuine community need in a substantial way.

Lessons learned about curriculum connections, standards, assessment and evaluation:
Service that is not tied to the curriculum is not service-learning.

Lessons learned about time:
Service-learning takes decidedly more time and is decidedly more powerful learning — for all involved.

Advice for Teachers, Students, Community Organizations, Volunteers, and all partners

Acknowledgements
PREFACE

For years, educators have been trying to help students see the relationship between their classroom learning and the “real world.” The rise of service-learning opportunities across the country has helped many students at many schools make the school-to-work connection.

With strong support from President Bush, the trend toward providing more meaningful service-learning opportunities is expected to continue. I hope that it will soon be possible for every student at every school to participate in service-learning every year.

At a time when our accountability systems increasingly force us to justify how we spend every precious minute of learning time, I continue to advocate for service-learning as a priority. In Saint Paul, where many of our schools are at the forefront of service-learning curriculum development, the benefits are compelling:

• Students get a sense of belonging and contributing as they work in teams to make a positive difference in their community.

• As the basic skills of math and reading are reinforced “on the job,” students gain an appreciation for the value of their classroom education.

• Schools establish relationships with local businesses and other community partners, whose involvement in education is essential.

I hope that by sharing what we’ve learned about service-learning in Saint Paul, we can add to the growing body of research on best practices in this emerging field. It is my firm belief that any public school system aiming to provide a truly world-class education to its students must include service-learning.

Superintendent
Saint Paul Public Schools
INTRODUCTION

Quality service-learning transforms students, schools and communities. Service-learning creates powerful learning experiences for students and strengthens ties between schools and community. While integrating curricular goals with a real community need, service-learning gives students the power and the voice to work for social change in their world. It engages them in their own learning process. Students become active learners and creators of history who have opportunities to realize their collective and personal power to make a difference. In order to engage in this kind of learning, teachers together with students must work to establish quality partnerships and collaboration with community organizations and community volunteers. Everyone is a teacher and everyone is a learner.

Service-learning, and our whole educational system, gets stronger when we seize opportunities to share our experiences together. Lessons Learned is based on interviews with teachers, students and their community partners who are doing service-learning in Saint Paul Public Schools. Among other things, they reclaimed a wetland, advocated for human rights, lobbied Congressional leaders, removed an invasive plant species and tailor-made Spanish books for children in El Salvador and Guatemala. In doing so, they learned a lot about service-learning—the educational methodology that made it all possible: both their learning and the community change that grew out of (and also supplied a large portion of) their learning.

This document contains the lessons learned that they’d like to pass on to you. The work that provided these lessons has paved the way for Saint Paul’s “Plan for District-Wide Service-Learning” which grew out of local and national research, including more than a dozen focus groups. The plan, written by a specially convened task force, recommends hearty support for service-learning but stops short of a mandate. The goal is that every student every year would participate in service-learning.

ONE MORE THING

We compiled this document assuming that our readers know more than a little about service-learning. In fact, we assume that you probably have been involved in service-learning and are anxious to do more of it, even better. If this is not the case, we hope you might still find these pages inspiring and informative. You might also find it helpful to follow some of the links at www.servicelearning.org to connect you with resources and assistance.
Service-learning makes school more fun, more interesting, and more meaningful.

**student voices**

- It’s all about learning and helping people at the same time, which is more fun because it’s real. When we know that what we do helps other people and makes them happy, it makes us happy too. This helps us realize the value of our work and we do it better.

- Kids need anything we can get to help us learn better. We are very capable at coming up with real solutions to real issues.

- It’s nice to work on something when you don’t know exactly what is going to happen next, there are lots of surprises as things unfold. This makes learning exciting.

- We get to learn in different ways. It’s not so much just out of the book all the time. We get to do things that are fun and important.

- We got to really see what was happening about our issue, not just listen to somebody talk about it.

- We start to realize how complex and interconnected things really are.

- Someone may follow in your footsteps and take it to the next level and really change the world—that’s what we did.

- Doing service-learning taught me a lot about how other kids around the world live and the conditions. I realized how lucky I am to have food, clothes and shelter.

- You learn how to make networks and these connections may help you later in life.

- You get comfortable sharing your ideas with others and if it doesn’t work out, you have to work that out too. This gives us a chance to see what we can really do.

**community partner voices**

- It gives people something they can be a part of. It helps them see that they can make a difference—what they do and say is important.

- Service-learning is a different kind of learning and it allows for different learning styles.

- Service-learning gives people a real understanding of citizenship.

- Kids come alive as their own gifts and hard work are needed and recognized. You can feel the change happening.
volunteer voices

• The class gives young people the opportunity to look at issues that concern them and know that they can make a difference. Maybe they can't change the world, but they can begin to look for solutions. They can look at the steps and learn the process. Service-learning teaches students about solidarity in a global society.

• It's fun working with different ages and it is fascinating to see how kids learn.

• This kind of learning is really valuable because it brings out abilities you wouldn't expect to see in some students.

• It helps breakdown stereotypes about how the neighborhood sees youth. When the students delivered flyers about their topic to neighborhood homes, many people talked with students for the first time.

• Service-learning strives to create a better society and at the same time improve education. Both goals are important and needed.

teacher voices

• Service-learning nurtures a life-long commitment to civic participation and social justice issues. Students learn to decipher and understand complex social issues in our society. It allows us all to see a different way of thinking.

• It teaches students how to engage in effective dialogue, not just debate. It develops real listening skills.

• When students are engaged in public problem solving, they learn about the issue of power and who has it. Students learn how to analyze and access power. They learn how to think carefully and strategically. They study power in relationships. They get informed, organized, and make allies. They learn how to shift their relationships with decision makers.

• Students learn about individual and group accountability. They learn about community building. Service-learning transforms a group of young people into a cohesive, productive team.

• This is long lasting and important work. Too many people see students as test takers and passive participants in their own education. Service-learning changes that.
It is worth the time it takes for students to build community partnerships, research essential knowledge, gain critical skills, and understand their roles as a team.

**Student voices**

- We learned how to talk with each other about what was important to us and why. More people were engaged in the discussion. It was really fun that we all got to work on what we wanted to do. We were much more engaged in our own learning.

- We learned the process of public problem solving, starting with choosing an issue of importance to us. We spent time getting to know each other. We learned how to do research, investigate an issue, interview people, invite guest speakers, make phone calls, ask more complex questions, report our progress, discuss our findings, and ask others for feedback. We learned how to give constructive feedback within our group and across groups. We learned how to identify stakeholders and map the power relationships. We also analyzed issues and their complexities. We designed solutions and when they didn’t work we came up with new ones.

- We had to do a lot of preparation work before we could do the project and then we got to really do it.

**Teacher voices**

- During the preparation stage, the real role of the teacher is to facilitate as the students build community, frame the issues, make community connections, overcome obstacles, and prepare to carry out the action plan.

- Teachers help students identify public problems that are important to them, analyze issues that are related to the problem and ask the question, “What do we need to know?” to help focus the research.

- Teachers help students focus the project so it is something they can accomplish in a reasonable amount of time so students can be successful.

- Before the action, the teacher should review all the plans and make sure everyone is clear about their roles. The teacher can check in to see if the students have everything they need. This activity lets everyone know they are ready.
The action is where the learning from the preparation stage comes together with service to strengthen communities and generate even more learning.

“This is the best part. It’s where we really get to see why we have been learning all about the subject. This is where it all comes together.”

—Student

community partner voices

• Students write letters, they learn how to work together to change a situation at their own school or in their own community. They can transfer the skills they have learned to other areas that are important to them.

• It’s important to anticipate as many of the logistics involved in the action stage as you can.

teacher voices

• All the pieces of a project are so specific to time and space and team that they evolve in unique ways every time. No project is ever the same twice.

• Almost all our community change projects fall into these four categories: public policy, teaching others, public information, and direct service.
Reflection activities that require higher-order thinking skills need to be done consistently throughout the different stages of the process.

**Student voices**

- Reflection can be a lot of fun and allow us to be very creative. We did a final reflection—in groups we made up a weather forecast about how we thought our projects went. There were different parts that were cloudy, stormy, sunny, etc. We presented our weather forecasts to the class.

- Reflection is important at all the different stages—planning, action and celebration. We did a lot of reflection activities. We had a lot of discussion and writing questions. We had to write how we thought things were going, or what we thought should be done about our issue. We discussed other issues in our community too.

**Teacher voices**

- Reflection can take many different forms. Students can write, read, do art, do storytelling, keep a journal, dance, make videos, write poetry, create sculptures, draw posters, do photography, perform role plays and skits, draw cartoons, and hold discussions.

- Reflection can be used as a tool to transition from one part of service-learning to the next. Writing fictional stories that incorporate what we learned from the community assessment was a great way to decide the focus of our projects.

- The goal is to get students thinking about their topics and their education in general. The teacher asks open-ended questions like: What is good about education? How can young people be involved in community change?

- Reflection is one of the best ways to help students see the interconnectedness between their own learning and global issues.

- Reflection activities can help students share their project with the school or broader community. Students can use disposable cameras to take pictures that represent their issue. They write about how the images symbolize the topic and then share the photo-journals with others.
The best celebration takes advantage of big and little opportunities to recognize all partners.

**Teacher Voices**

- We know from both experience and from brain research that enthusiastic celebration of service-learning is critical to retaining both student learning and community partnerships.

- Sometimes unexpected recognition can be a powerful form of celebration. One class made books in Spanish for a library in Guatemala. Some children wrote to the students thanking them for the books; the Saint Paul students loved getting those letters.

- Like reflection, celebration can be simple and ongoing. We need to acknowledge our specialists, community experts and partner organizations. They need to be thanked more often and more regularly. You don’t all have to wait for the closing celebration to let them know how grateful you are for their help.

**Community Partner Voices**

- It is very important to give kids and their community partners space and time to celebrate their accomplishments. It’s fun and very meaningful.

**Student Voices**

- Great celebrations have plenty of food and lots of fun.
The process of doing service-learning is more important than the product.

**student voices**

- Doing service-learning takes a lot of teamwork. You have to be patient. It’s very time consuming to build the relationships with your group so you are able to help each other out. You have to be dedicated to the group. If things get hard, don’t give up.

- Every student needs to have clearly defined roles. Sometimes it’s hard working in groups when this doesn’t happen—if roles aren’t clearly defined a few people end up doing a lot of the work.

- Groups need to be well supervised. If everybody knows who is doing what, everyone can be accountable. It’s important for the teacher to make sure that everyone stays caught up and no one gets behind.

**community partner voices**

- Service-learning is not something that can be easily explained and it’s not easy to do. It changes every year too. It is complicated.

- We never have it down pat. This is a constant learning experience.

- There always needs to be a public link between the community assessment and the development of the project. It seems obvious, but it can be a challenge to resist choosing the project on your own.

**volunteer voices**

- The best service-learning projects have a healthy variety of ways that students can be involved but also maintain a central focus so each child is learning throughout the process.

- I was impressed with the timeline that we made and the deadlines that were set. This is a real life skill. It took a lot of work to make the timeline, but it was worth it. We all could see where we were going.

- When students start their projects and they hit that first brick wall, they often come back frustrated and ready to give up. They don’t want to go any farther. They don’t see how. One of the biggest things I tell them is “Until you hear ‘no’ from someone, you haven’t even started.” You have to have energy. I encourage the students to do something. “Don’t give up—you’re just starting the process.”
• Service-learning is always evolving; it's a continual process that can't be packaged. It's not straightforward. Things change and come up all the time and you have to deal with them. I use the same process every year but the kids choose different topics and projects each time so it's always new.

• Sometimes students feel there's only one solution and it's the only way. When it doesn't work they get frustrated and the process can fall apart. It's difficult for kids to find resources on their own. They need help to find organizations, make contacts and do research.

• Students learn that frustration is a part of the process. They learn how to confront obstacles directly and how to develop strategies to overcome them.

• In the fall it was fun to go around and look at things. It was hard to keep the groups motivated in the winter. The middle of the year gets hard, doing a timeline really helps so kids can see what they have already accomplished and what they still have left to do.

• Picking one topic and doing many things with it is much easier than addressing multiple topics with multiple projects.

• It's important for teachers to do some planning, but it's equally important (though challenging) to leave space in your plans for youth voice to emerge.

Facilitators need
- to be highly organized,  
- to know about resources that are available for students  
- to form partnerships (ahead of time if possible),  
- to allow for student choice and leadership,  
- to incorporate shared decision-making,  
- to be open minded and flexible,  
- to be willing to let go of traditional classroom control, and  
- plenty of time to plan.

—Teacher
Student ownership translates into educational excellence.

**Student voices**
- I really liked it that the kids got to make a lot of the decisions; most of the time we got to choose how we were going to do things, the teacher gave us suggestions if we needed ideas.
- We got to decide what we were going to do about the problem. It’s fun to see what the other kids come up with. Young people can be so creative when we are given the opportunity.
- Let the kids decide. Let them pick an action project they want to work on in the community and let them take action—otherwise they don’t have ownership of their work.
- Sometimes might seem exciting to the teacher, but are actually boring to the students.
- We made big choices.

**Community Partner voices**
- The stronger the youth voice the better the project.
- Everyone is a teacher and everyone is a learner.
- Student involvement in planning, design and execution makes the work genuinely theirs. If there’s trust between students and teachers it lightens the load of the teacher.
- We help students challenge the status quo in the classroom. We help them develop the skills so they can be the drivers of the process and directors of their own education.
- Students need to talk to each other and learn from each other’s experiences. They can observe each other and develop their own tactics.
- Youth voice is tricky. It’s a balancing act between achieving plenty of youth voice and also giving enough focus and guidance so students can be successful.
- Really focus on letting the students develop their own leadership and process. Emphasize individual leadership and team building activities.
- Our goal is for youth to be engaged in doing such great and important work that adults take notice of it and start taking them seriously. We don’t want young people to be just token youth on boards.
• Service-learning encourages participation from all people in different ways. It’s a great way for students to experience new roles; it’s very empowering. The more places and opportunities students have to take on different responsibilities and to work intergenerationally the better. They can learn from each other. It breaks down stereotypes on both sides when people start working together.

• People need to take kids more seriously. Service-learning needs to be more than a grant write-off, more than a proud showcase for the grownups to point at, and say “let’s put these nice kids on the head.” It needs to be much deeper than that. Service-learning is a way to allow kids to have the voice and the power they need to really make significant changes.

• The teacher and I would gather the kids in a circle and briefly talk about human rights and think of topics. We would give some guidance but the ideas came from the students. It’s a very good way to have ownership. Sometimes it can be divisive when one group wants one project and the other one wants something else. The bottom line is to really listen to the kids.

• It is amazing to start with the kids’ own experiences and go from there, taking it to the next level. It is important work to let students think for themselves about their beliefs and decide what to do. Service-learning is the teaching I have always wanted to do.

• Students hold class meetings, brainstorm ideas, and come up with many different ideas. They learn about the democratic process. Not everyone can get exactly what he or she wants, but everyone has a role to play.

• Listen to the young people, you don’t really know what kind of impact you’ll have on them until you ask them to do things. It’s amazing how they shine. It’s amazing to see different people shine at different times. They all have different gifts. Kids who are school smart aren’t always the leaders. They are not always the ones volunteering to do things. You can’t really predict what they are going to show you.

• It’s hard to plan for youth voice and at the same time allow for it to emerge naturally.

• It’s so hard to have multiple groups in the same classroom—it’s hard to manage. And yet, if you only have one topic, it’s hard to allow for maximum youth voice.

• Kids can do amazing things.
Effective service-learning partnerships draw schools back into the community and the community back into schools.

- This is about people taking care of their community. Our students said, “It was easy: we taught them about a problem and then invited them to help us do something about it.”

- Different perspectives from different team members make service-learning stronger.

- Make sure the partnership goes both ways—it must be a good match. Your partners need to get something out of the relationship and so do you and the students.

- Community resource people are impressed and eager to help when they see kids who want to make a difference. They like to come into classes and talk. Perhaps most importantly they like to listen to kids.

- It takes time to build relationships but it’s essential to get to know the kids. Respect and listen to the students and they will listen to you too. This will help you figure out how to make this learning the most meaningful.

- Build community connections in the beginning, when you’re designing the project. Too much time is wasted by not capitalizing on valuable community links. You don’t have to do exactly what they say, but it is important to keep up a dialogue.

- Both those being served and those serving must be part of developing real solutions.
Let teachers choose who their partners are. Partnerships must be built from the bottom up; they cannot be imposed.

If a project gets taken out of student hands by a well-meaning but misdirected community partner, student ownership (and with it, student motivation) is devastated. This can be frustrating for the students and the volunteers alike.

Our organization is challenged to unlock the mysteries about how teachers develop curriculum so that we can interlock our approach with their teaching methods.

Teaching assistants in the room for the inclusion students can help enhance the service-learning that takes place. They are very valuable resources.

Weekly planning meetings with all the partners together let everybody know what is coming next. Excellent communication with all partners is essential.

The training and support partners receive is what makes them effective and what gives them the successful experience that will keep them coming back.
Because senior volunteers and students are co-learners and co-teachers, intergenerational service-learning adds depth and wisdom to the process and to the product.

**Community Partner Voices**

- Doing intergenerational service-learning helps break down barriers between young people and adults. Both groups are not always taken as seriously and respected as much as they should be in our society. By bringing the two groups together it shows them that they have a powerful effect on our community and they have a valuable role in our world.

- As the coordinator for the senior volunteers, I call the day before and tell them what they will be doing. I remind them what’s coming up next or what happened last time or in-between times. This is an important communication link that sometimes gets overlooked.

**Volunteer Voices**

- It’s really important for the senior volunteers to sit with the students in their groups, not at the back of the room.

— Student
Service-learning can increase parent involvement, but it takes work . . . and is worth it.

**teacher voices**

- We often have senior volunteers who don’t reflect the racial make up of our classroom. Maybe this would change if we recruit more parents.

- There needs to be more outreach to parents. They are a wonderful resource for service-learning so we have to get them involved. It is important to communicate to them that their kids are working on real learning that will have an impact on the community. We’re planning to hold a parent forum where we can be specific about ways they can participate.

- Publicize the project among parents. Students can make use of the school newspaper and parent newsletter to write about what they are doing. When parents know what the class is doing, they’re more likely to help.

**volunteer voices**

- Promote and engage parents more. Make use of their skills and expertise. They can do much more than help supervise field trips. Draw more on your “in-house” expertise, it makes a difference for the kids when you really get the parents (and other teachers) involved.

- Don’t settle for parental involvement. Go for actual participation, and even leadership.
Volunteers deserve great on-going training, support, and relationship-building that is as significant to them as they are to the project.

**What to tell a volunteer:**
You are making a commitment to make an impact. You don’t need expertise on everything, as long as you are willing to learn with the kids. You need to want to be there and you must care about students and the community. As long as you’re there and showing you care, you are making an impact.

—Community Partner

**Teacher Voices**

- Volunteers are both leaders and learners. They must learn to work together as a team in both roles. Volunteers come in with needs too, including a need to feel useful, to have a sense of accomplishment, and do things they enjoy.
- It’s a big job to balance all the volunteers’ needs with the students’ needs. It’s much more than saying, “OK kids, ‘they’ are here and are going to help us.” It’s about building relationships.
- There are many ways to give volunteers on-going training and support so they can be effective and have fun. I developed an introduction packet for perspective volunteers. The volunteers learn the basics of the service-learning process and some guidelines for working with the students. I get a sense of who they are so I can match them up with the right group of students and the issues that are most important to them. I also encourage the volunteers to talk to a person who has done it in the past to get ideas. We hold a ‘coaches training’ a few times a year, and a de-briefing session for volunteers after every session with the students.
- It is helpful to have a get-together with last year’s volunteers to share what they liked, what they learned and what they found challenging. It’s also a good time to share plans for the coming year with the new volunteers.
volunteer voices

• Ideally volunteers make a commitment to come once a week to the classroom to help out. One volunteer said, “It’s difficult to really build relationships when you aren’t always ‘in’ on all the different parts of the process. Sometimes it’s hard to catch up on where the students are at and where they are going next.”

• It’s good to use the skills the volunteers have, but it’s also important to ask them what they want to do. “I am good at making quilts, but I am tired of doing them with students. I am glad we didn’t do a quilt this year.”

• The volunteers need time to build relationships with the students they are working with. Name tags and get-to-know you games are important at first; good reflection helps do this later as well.

community partner voices

• Because it’s so costly, our organization does background checks on all our senior volunteers for the school district.

• Volunteers need clear expectations and solid training. There’s a tremendous need for regular communication with volunteers. Administrators need to support this by considering what teachers do to train and sustain their volunteers as part of their teaching duties.

“We have created a community for each other—students and volunteers together.”
—Volunteer
Internal collaboration can overcome the obstacles within schools that sometimes make service-learning feel impossible.

“\[\text{I try to involve other staff in the projects.} \]
\[\text{Interest spreads as more people talk about the work.} \]
\[\text{Kids see that and respond to it. In fact, all of us do.}\]”

—Teacher

We need to share what we’re doing with service-learning at different schools so we can create ways to support and help each other. Service-learning champions can mentor others.

A school’s service-learning effort can’t be just a few committed teachers. It needs to be broadly school-based so it can be sustained should those committed teachers leave. An informal network of practitioners creates space for everyone to reflect on and improve their practice.

Kids are really able to engage other kids. When students present to students, the most amazing responses and challenging questions come up. Student to student teaching and learning is very effective at making something stick—at going further and deeper—galvanizing students to look at the world in new ways. They share their knowledge and make it incredibly interactive.

School structures can be very disempowering for students. Here they are planning a presentation to our Senator—providing real and independent leadership—and then they have to stop and ask me for permission to go the restroom. Do I break school rules and let them act like the responsible people we want them to be or do I respect protocol and make them ask me to write out a pass?

Students need to be a central part of the discussion and decisions that are being made about service-learning at the district level.

I think it’s totally possible to involve all kids when you do service-learning. I include deaf and hard of hearing students, English language learners and students who are mentally impaired. Service-learning compels you to include everyone. Still, it does take collaboration within the school to support teachers and students so full inclusion can be successful.

There is a knee-jerk reaction, almost a paranoia, about teachers not producing students who can compete in real world situations. Schools fall prey to tremendous pressure, which—ironically—puts them in a straight jacket about creatively, and intuitively using service-learning to give students the skills they will need to compete in the real world.

I’ve learned that we need more scheduling flexibility in the schools, pure and simple.
Having access to adequate funding and resources can be a challenge. My students end up writing grants every year in order to do their projects. Grant writing is a wonderful skill, but sometimes I wish we didn’t have to spend so much time getting the money to do the work.

Scheduling can be a real problem. It’s even harder when you have students who are being pulled out for special services (speech, special education, ELL, etc.). If you are going to be working on a special project, the teacher has to remember to let all the special teachers know ahead of time.

Service-learning can help all of us learn how systems work. All schools and organizations have complex bureaucracies. Either we figure out how to work with these structures or we figure out ways to change them.

It’s ideal to keep administrators in the ‘service-learning loop.’ But when they just don’t get it (despite all my attempts) I’ve learned that if I don’t ask their permission, they can’t say no.

It’s amazing what teachers can do when they are given the proper tools, but they need ongoing support. Administrators can help make that happen. They need to be more understanding of the service-learning process, more supportive of the teachers … and they need to give kids more of the credit. Districts must allocate resources for transportation, administrative leadership, and ongoing teacher training (especially for new teachers).
All partners—but especially students—must clearly understand how the project meets a genuine community need in a substantial way.

To whatever extent possible, the people who benefit from the service are involved in creating the project.

Sometimes the real needs of a community aren’t the ones that are on TV or that get talked about. The difficulty in identifying a project can become the project itself: students can make presentations and raise awareness about the issues that aren’t always accessible through the mainstream media.

My students object if they feel like they’re doing ‘busy work.’ They hate feeling unprepared or ineffective. They love knowing the work they prepare for is really going to help someone.

‘Community’ can be the person sitting next to you, the whole planet, or anything in between. Projects that meet a ‘community need,’ then, could be within a classroom or have a school-wide, national or international focus.

I don’t think a lot of people know about the problem we worked on. I didn’t before this class. I think if more people knew about it more people would care. That’s what we tried to do with our project.

One of my students always says “If I can’t use it to help my community, why should I have to learn it?” I like that question . . . the ways we help our community with what we know have surprised all of us.
Service that’s not tied to the curriculum isn’t service learning.

- Look at your standards and see how you can meet them through service-learning so it’s not an add-on. It’s the way you meet the graduation standards.

- Try and integrate as many different subject areas and disciplines as you can. Our project was integrated with writing, poetry, art work, stories, journaling, plays and so much more. What I remember the most are the images, not the words.

- Students can create final reporting and recommendations for future groups who might be interested in pursuing the same topic.

- Individual and group portfolios are amazing tools. Everyone can see what we’re learning and what a difference we’re making.

- Self and peer assessment can be very helpful to insure individual and group accountability.

- Kids make connections between other subject areas to enhance the project; more ownership develops as well. For example, students brought to the mural project calligraphy skills and art theory ideas from the unit on History of the Written Word.

- Even though I strongly believe service-learning needs to be a higher priority in the curriculum, I know it won’t work if it is mandated.

- A service project without curricular learning is just a day out of school.

“Service-learning gives students an opportunity to apply their learning to real problems.”

—Teacher
Service-learning takes decidedly more time and is decidedly more powerful learning—for all involved.

“\textit{It takes more time. I wish we could have had more time.}”

—Student

\textbf{Volunteer Voices}

\begin{itemize}
  \item It takes time to build relationships with students (team work) and to build alliances with community partners.
\end{itemize}

\textbf{Community Partner Voices}

\begin{itemize}
  \item There is never enough time. Focus first on issue investigation and project development and then the individual talents and gifts later.
  
  \item I wish we had more planning and training time with teachers. These need to occur at critical moments during the service-learning process. It could be strategic development and it could be built in release time. We need support from the administrators to allow for this and we need to tune into when these moments are.
  
  \item Schools put teachers under a lot of constraints. It makes doing quality service-learning harder and harder. Schools are under pressure to reduce innovation—to meet graduation standards and increase test scores. They have to do lots of paperwork. It's a back to basics approach and it takes a lot of time. This puts a freeze on a teacher's capacity to respond to the individual student more creatively.
  
  \item Senior volunteers have busy schedules. Students are very involved in other things. Schools have busy schedules too. It's hard to coordinate.
\end{itemize}

\textbf{Teacher Voices}

\begin{itemize}
  \item It's hard to accomplish some action plans within a semester or yearlong class. It takes time for long-term solutions to emerge. When students do solid final reporting and evaluations, new students can carry the action plans on, building on the foundation that's already been laid. Former students can continue the work, too.
  
  \item On the plus side, students develop time management skills!
\end{itemize}
Advice for TEACHERS

“Service-learning is more work, but there is also more powerful learning that takes place as a result.”

—Teacher

You have to wear many hats. You are half youth worker, half teacher of your subject and half community organizer. It is essential that you are an educator that allows kids to take the power and go with it. The teacher becomes a facilitator who offers students moral support, skills, tools, resources, guidance and a framework to maintain focus on the goal and visualize the steps they will be taking.

When a community organization wants to collaborate with you, investigate and explore the possibilities and go for it. Having great community partners is going to make your job easier and make your teaching better.

Don’t underestimate how important it is or how long it will take to build relationships both within your classroom as well as with partners. One good way to give everyone a sense of accomplishment, momentum, and a deeper level of reflection is to do small “mini”-service-learning projects early on in the process.

It is important for everyone to understand the impact service-learning has on the school, community, students and parents. As teachers we often only think of it in terms of the impact it has on student learning.

Incorporate as many things from as many different curricular areas as you can.

Students may need to learn specific skills to carry out a project. It’s the teacher’s job to find creative ways to give students these skills.

Start small. I did four different projects with four different groups my first year and it was too much.

The teacher doesn’t need to be the expert on the topic. Kids find this refreshing. It is really a shared process.

Be open to new ideas even if you’ve been doing it for years. Listen to students and the community.

There is a struggle between being an educator and an organizer. Good facilitating is both.

Be careful not to overwhelm students by giving them too much too soon.

Guide student’s leadership. Allow them to run with their creativity.

Sometimes I can see a failure coming. The trick is to know how to let it flop. Students can learn so much when things don’t go their way. There’s a delicate balance between when to let natural consequences occur and when to step in or speak up.

Service-learning takes a lot of time; you have to be patient and let the process unfold. Sometimes it feels like you are getting nowhere, but eventually it all comes together.

Try and build the projects from one semester to the next so the students can develop a deeper understanding of the topic. It is impossible to implement a long-lasting solution to a complex problem in one semester. The students from the first semester can explain what they did and the new students can take it to a higher level. For example, different students at our school have been tackling the citizenship exam for four years.

Take time to reflect and understand the way you are teaching and the way students learn.

Key to Quotations

Key to Quotations

Student
Volunteer
Teacher
Community Partner
Advice for **STUDENTS**

- Have fun.
- Don’t think of yourselves as ‘just kids.’ Start slowly and work to see how far you can go. We never thought we’d be lobbying congressional leaders in DC.
- You have to really learn about your issue and you have to learn about each other. Share what your gifts and talents are. Where do you shine? Where do you need help? Learn how to talk about your strengths and limitations.
- Learn where to go to find information.
- Teachers don’t give you all the answers. They can give you ideas about what to do, but the work is up to you and your group. Being flexible doesn’t hurt, either.
- Sometimes it feels overwhelming and like you’ll never be able to learn enough to educate others about your issue. Sometimes it feels like you’ll never have enough time to be able to make a difference. Don’t give up.
- Remember that you are in charge of your own learning.
- Open your eyes to other issues that are related to your topic. Everything is interwoven; nothing is independent to itself.
- Be ready to make community contacts. Watch out because some people don’t show proper respect to young voices on the phone, so you have to be prepared. Practice role-playing with your friends what you want to communicate in phone calls to organizations.
- Sometimes planning can feel like it’s taking forever. Don’t rush it because it makes a solid foundation.
- Remember that young people are only the leaders of tomorrow if they procrastinate.
- You cannot do it all overnight. It takes time, hard work, and lots of patience.
- Don’t think that celebration can only be done by adults: celebrate early and often.
- Tell your family and friends—they may decide to join you.

Advice for **COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS**

- Be practical about how to interact with schools. Get support from the administration, but figure out who to connect with and how to make it work as well as how to keep it working if teachers leave. Look for committed teachers and other allies with similar values.
- Recruit volunteers who don’t mind that service-learning is often re-created into something different every year. All teachers do it in their own way, as well. We have a much easier time recruiting volunteers for tutoring and reading programs. Because I can’t tell the volunteers exactly what they will be doing, they need to be flexible and commited enough to weather the ups and downs.
- It’s a long process to build alliances. You have to stay with it. It’s easy to get frustrated with short term vision.
- Be very flexible. This allows you to shift and change within a sometimes volatile school environment.
- We all have our own agenda. We need to help each other out more. Increase teamwork and levels of trust. We need to work together to build a common agenda—you need to be willing to give your time and services to partners in order to get something back. This is how you build strong relationships that lead to strong alliances.

“We should always encourage kids to figure out what they care about, help them learn the skills they need to do something about it and give them the space to go for it.”

—Volunteer
Advice for VOLUNTEERS

The seniors are there to share, but also to be good listeners. Kids have lots of good insights. I have never worked with a group where I didn’t learn a whole lot.

Service-learning is not the way most of us learned how to do things in school. This is hard for some volunteers to understand. Listen to what the kids are saying. Don’t be afraid to add your own ideas, but don’t impose your opinions on them. It’s never too late to learn new things. As volunteers we are both co-learners and co-leaders together with the students.

Get as involved as possible and be there as often as you can.

It’s so important to have fun together too. We have a monthly potluck with all of our team members. It’s a fun time and we occasionally hold a planning meeting afterwards. We can reflect and brainstorm new ideas. Sometimes we just need to be together.

Sometimes it is hard when the rest of the group doesn’t think the way I do. Then, it’s majority rules. I want to take over and insist the students do it “my way.” I have to stop myself and remember why I am here—to help facilitate their learning, even if I think they are making a mistake, they can learn from it.

Be flexible. Keep your eyes and ears open to see and hear how kids are responding. What you are trying to get them to do with you is not school as usual. It helps to create a simple ritual or routine that you use every time before you begin to get the students back to that new way of thinking. Ask students to share what they have learned since the last time you met with them. Do something to help them re-focus. It’s a very different way of learning.

There are always some kids who think it’s not important, the ones who grumble and drag their feet. It is important to provide a variety of ways for kids to participate so they can use their talents in a way that’s comfortable to them. Help kids learn new ways to do what they are good at and do it better. I like to have a one-on-one conversation to help kids discover how the project relates to them and see why it’s important. This helps make it more real.

Enjoy the kids. Sometimes they are challenging too. Whatever our projects are about, it’s the human relations piece that really matters.

General Advice for ALL PARTNERS

“If it is done right, students, the community, and volunteers benefit almost equally from service-learning.”
—Community Partner

Be prepared to raise your expectations.
Passion is a prerequisite, but it cannot be the sustaining force.
Spend enough time developing the process, making it a quality effort.
Start small, perfect your program before you try and reach everyone.
In the long run, keep it simple, this allows for more people to participate.
When you invite new energy to come in, you increase power by giving it away.
Build and maintain alliances that allow you to have independence.
Don’t be afraid to assert your values. If you are authentic and aligned with what you believe, you will gain credibility. Don’t try to do things just to fit in.
Create a system that can be updated easily to keep track of your allies and efforts.
You can only plan so much, you must also let the process unfold.
It costs money.
Don’t give up.
Trust intuition and synergy above other approaches in the long run. It’s important to plan but being able to read the signs for an opportunity allows you the freedom to seize the moment.
It’s important to take a rest and take care of you. You need to try and keep your work out of your personal life, which is especially hard to do when it is so engaging.
Be prepared to be surprised.
Acknowledgements

These lessons are a result of reflections of Saint Paul Public School students, teachers, volunteers, and community organization staff who have done service-learning together. Special thanks to all those who shared their time and expertise to be interviewed for this project. Saint Paul teachers: Mara Coyle, Martha Johnson, Nancy Nelson, Lynn Schultz, and Kita Vang. Saint Paul students: Hannah Kaup, Zach Keple, Philip Mollner, Maddie Orenstein, Mang Vang and Alex Wall. RSVP Senior Volunteer: Lois Boylan. Parent volunteer: Jane Keple. Community organizations: Erika Friedman (Across Generations, RSVP), Deanna Gallagher (Partners in Human Rights Education), Nick Longo (Metro State University), Sage Passi (EcoEducation), Anna Stachow (YO - Youth Organizing), D’Ann Urbaniak Lesch (Jane Addams School for Democracy) and Charla Weiss (Resource Center of the Americas). Their comments were provided during in-depth conversations with Martha Johnson during the summer of 2001. Martha has been an innovative and dedicated teacher in Saint Paul Public Schools for 15 years and is a passionate advocate for curriculum based service-learning in the schools.

We would also like to thank Hannah, Nalini and Tim Ramer, Martha Aby, Lori Lawonn, Renie Willard, Nancy Miller, Sharon Adams-Taylor, Jim Kielsmeier, Bruce Cochran, and all the Opening The Schoolhouse Doors partners in Aiken, SC; Greendale, WI; Greenfield, MA; Iowa City, IA; Arundel, ME; Wells, ME; District 8, The Bronx; Saint Paul, MN; Springfield MA; Spring Lake Park, MN; Waterford, CT; White Bear Lake, MN; and Wisconsin Heights, WI.

This publication is made possible through the work of the Saint Paul Public Schools, the National Youth Leadership Council and the American Association of School Administrators, through a program called Opening School House Doors. The program was funded by a grant from the Learn and Serve America Program of the Corporation for National Service (No. 97GVA011). Opinions or points of view expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Corporation or Learn and Serve America.

This document was compiled and written by Martha Johnson of the Saint Paul Public Schools, edited by Zac Willette of the National Youth Leadership Council, and designed by Bruce Cochran of Satellite Design.