

Foreword

The American education system exists to prepare young people to develop the knowledge, skills, and disposition to succeed in life. Too often, though, the system fails to meet the needs of all children and youth. For a large variety of reasons, educators often feel compelled to use instructional methods that engage only some of the children, try to cover all the material in a textbook instead of focusing on teaching the most important subject matter for students to learn, and focus on students' knowledge rather than skills and disposition development.

Some educators, though, are willing to take the risk of doing things a different way. These educators recognize that people learn best when they are appropriately challenged, when they have a way to connect new knowledge and skills with things they already know, and when they can see that what they learn has utility in real life. These educators do not abandon standards or assessments, but rather, take them as a given and look for the best pedagogies to capture the attention of all their students and provide students with multiple ways of learning.

Many educators who embrace this philosophy have found that service-learning is one of the instructional methods that serves young people best. Service-learning is an approach that facilitates students' learning of academic standards through engaging them in providing service that meets real community needs. Young people may build a playground as a way to learn geometry, measurement, or other mathematics skills. They may examine statistics that show that local infant mortality is connected with poor nutrition in homeless shelters and public housing units, and initiate a campaign to provide nutritional information for new parents in doctors' offices and clinics and free vitamin enriched infant formula for those in need. Students may have seen injuries caused by poor traffic control by their schools, investigate how to get the city to install traffic lights, and develop a strategy to convince officials to do so. They may see the need to capture the stories of World War II from local seniors who fought in the war, and by writing interview questions and developing multimedia presentations for other students, help history come alive for themselves and others. They may see younger students in need of tutoring to learn reading skills or in need of a model to show them how to work with disabled persons. The list of needs is endless, and students who are given the opportunity generally are creative in identifying what they can do to provide service that enables them to master the standards in the curriculum. For educators, service-learning

just takes the will to do it, a little time, and the willingness to let students take more control of their own learning.

As a researcher in the field of service-learning, I have learned firsthand about what participation in high-quality service-learning can do for students. At RMC Research Corporation, we have done studies that show there are positive outcomes for students, community members, and educators.

First, depending on the nature of the service-learning activities, students tend to derive academic, career, social, and civic benefits. The academic benefits come because students are more engaged in their learning and tend to see the value that school can bring. Their engagement is cognitive (they want to learn the subject matter), affective (they like school and the subject matter better), and behavioral (they do what they are asked to do). This engagement, in turn, helps students to acquire knowledge and skills related to the content standards. However, service-learning is associated more often with the acquisition of higher-order skills such as problem solving, perspective taking, and analysis, than with the more basic ones. That is because service-learning, when conducted well, asks students to become involved with identifying a community need, providing evidence that the need exists, brainstorming multiple ways to meet the need, selecting from among alternatives, implementing the solution to the problem, and seeing the literal consequences of their choices. Service-learning is deeper, tends to be remembered longer, and is more easily transferred to other settings than are other forms of learning.

Students also tend to develop strong relationships with their peers who are engaged in the service with them and with adults other than their teachers and parents. This relational aspect of service-learning meets the developmental needs of young people, particularly those in middle school and high school, and provides them with an avenue to form a strong relationship with a caring adult who may serve as a role model for both behavior and ethics. RMC Research Corporation's studies show that young people frequently experience a strong sense of efficacy when engaged in service-learning because they feel that they are making a difference in solving a problem. These studies also find that from service-learning, students become more attached to their schools and communities and more likely to show pride in these settings and take on greater responsibility for the well-being of others. They learn more about possible careers through the adults they meet during their service and in the research and presentation activities that are often associated with the service-learning tasks.

Young people also tend to become more civic-minded as a result of service-learning. They are often better able to see the ways in which our democracy works, their roles and responsibilities within it, and both their power to make a difference and the need to respect others and the laws and policies that govern our collective behavior. Students learn firsthand how decisions are made, how teaming occurs, how social issues are addressed, and the results of social action. They may learn about justice, government, and fairness. They see the world as being bigger than just their own place within it.

Community members benefit, not just from having needs met but from establishing stronger bonds with youth and with school systems. These bonds

tend to change the nature of these relationships, with community members often remarking how valuable young people can be as resources and how important their opinions about life and the community are in understanding how to shape the future. Community members also tend to become more supportive of schools, since they see the challenges and strengths of the educational system.

In addition, teachers and administrators tend to benefit from service-learning through experiencing the energy and motivation of the young people and the need to reexamine the pedagogies in use in order to produce the deepest and broadest learning. Service-learning often prompts discussions among faculty about how young people learn best, how instruction can be differentiated, how to capitalize on students' strengths, how to scaffold learning, and how to make learning engaging and meaningful. Many of the most successful teachers talk about how they had to learn to let go, giving students more choices but also more responsibility for their own learning. Those teachers who were able to find the right combination of structure and choice said that they would never go back to teaching the way they did before they tried service-learning.

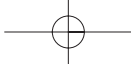
The story is not all rosy, though. Service-learning only produces these results when it is implemented with high quality. Low-quality service-learning has no yield in any of the ways outlined—none at all.

What is high-quality service-learning? Studies at RMC Research Corporation show that high quality is associated with four service-learning implementation strategies. First, service-learning must be linked to standards. Without a strong, intentional link, service-learning does not produce the type of knowledge and skills that the curriculum calls for. This link can be forged more deeply when students are made aware of the particular standards that need to be mastered through the service-learning experience.

Second, students need to have direct contact with those being served. At RMC Research Corporation, we have found that such personal relationships are important and make a deep impression on those providing service. When students talk with those who benefit from the service, students tend to derive more benefit themselves and the relationship becomes mutually rewarding. In addition, service then has a human face and is seen by students as more complex and more fulfilling.

Third, the service-learning reflection activities must be cognitively challenging. Teachers cannot simply ask students to write something in their journals describing their experiences. Rather, students should be required to engage in multiple types of reflection (such as nonlinguistic representations of their experiences, tying the experiences in with content standards, and providing explicit analysis of solution sets) and to employ other advanced thinking skills (such as evaluation, critique, analysis, synthesis, and inference). Teachers know how to elicit this work: They simply need to be more intentional and thoughtful about weaving these skills into the reflection and demonstration of knowledge activities.

Finally, the service-learning activities should involve youth voice and choice. Young people must have the opportunity to make decisions, see the



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consequences of their actions, and make decisions to improve their own processes. Ideally, young people are taught how to assess community needs through mapping or other strategies, debate the needs to be tackled, develop explicit decision-making criteria, make choices, and evaluate the consequences of their actions.

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