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# Service Learning:

## Linking Service and Academics in Urban Schools

By Christina R. McElwee, M.Ed.

The involvement of students in community service is not a new concept. How often have the students in your community schools been involved in food drives, picking up trash on the playground, or tutoring younger students? Why then do educational reformists act as if the shift from community service or mandatory volunteer hours is a new journey; a journey referred to as service learning.

Service learning is defined as a "...method under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs, that are integrated into the students' academic curriculum...by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community." (Furco, 1996, p. 1) When implemented effectively, service learning can combine challenging curricular standards with authentic experiences. As an educator, it is often difficult to keep students interested and motivated in the academic rigor of daily assignments, writing compositions, history projects, etc. However, when students deal with real life issues in relation to their core curriculum, they become more engaged and are able to recognize the purpose of their learning.

However, with the onslaught of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the significant pressure for schools to describe their success based on student performance on standardized tests, is service learning a viable option for schools, especially urban schools? Urban schools often struggle to meet state and federal requirements. These schools must choose use methods that result in improved learning, retention of content, and an increase in standardized test scores (Soslau & Yost, 2007). Service learning is one of these methods.

Numerous studies have been conducted demonstrating the impact of service learning on student learning and motivation in inner city schools (Cohen & Kinsey, 1994, Kielsmeier, 2003, Moore & Sandholtz, 1999, Soslau & Yost, 2007). The results show that students who participate in service learning are more likely to make real-world connections. They are able to see the correlation between their academic goals and what they are experiencing in their community. But this is not the only benefit. Research also shows that students who participated in service learning made greater academic gains in reading and math. The results also show an increase in attendance and a decrease in the amount of students being suspended (Soslau &

Yost, 2007). From this we can make the assumption that students were more motivated to come to school because they see the purpose and relevance in the learning that was taking place.

In preparing for service learning projects, teachers and administrators work to identify community needs, align curriculum with community issues and determine resources (Glickman & Thompson, 2009). These resources come in the form of parental involvement, community members, businesses, agencies, and organizations. Student involvement begins with students understanding their community's needs and choosing an issue to address. Students then work to outline a problem and to determine steps toward a solution. By giving the students involvement from the beginning, the opportunity to make choices, and to play a role in determining the project steps, they become more personally invested in the service learning project. Throughout the service learning projects, students process their experiences and their learning through reflection. Through these reflections, students, "...identify ways to make positive contributions to the community, determine the impact of their contributions, and consider their roles as citizens of the community" (Glickman & Thompson, 2009, p. 11). Students are also allowed the opportunity to celebrate their service learning including recognition of participants, assessment of student learning, and evaluation of the projects (Glickman & Thompson, 2009). This process allows the students to seek feedback from service recipients and allows teachers to determine the instructional implications of the project.

Service learning projects provide the real-life contextual experiences that are not available within standard curriculum materials. Service learning activities help students make a connection between the curriculum and their lives, but how do urban schools integrated this authenticity into their curriculum?

As an educator at an urban school I have seen numerous examples of service learning. Older students have partnered with younger students for reading and literacy activities. The older students then reflect on their experience serving as literacy leaders. Through analysis of the reflection I have discovered that projects like this helped students to feel more responsible. They felt involved and invested in the younger students' learning. Second grade students have become partners with residents at nursing homes. They have created cards, volun-

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teered, and written biographies of several of the residents. This project met state writing and social studies standards while also providing great joy to the nursing home patrons. Our latest endeavor is a community garden, which has formed a partnership with our local neighborhood association. Students are primarily in charge of maintaining the garden with some teacher assistance. This project has helped to cover science, social studies, and language arts standards while forging a partnership with the community and parents. Older students commented on how service learning made them see the relevance of what they were learning and how the increased level of collaboration made them want to learn more.

Service learning projects are an excellent way for students to meet state and federal standards. Educators need to help the students of today gain the knowledge, skills, and resourcefulness to find the solutions to tomorrow's problems. Service learning is a way to give students the tools that they need to live prosperous, productive, and collaboratively with others. In an educational system that is filled with mandates, requirements, and federal regulations; service learning provides a way for students to be involved in their education, to enhance their academic performance, and to help their communities. How can we not do service learning in urban schools? ☺

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