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Service Learning:
Driving School Reform in the 1990s

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Introduction: New initiatives in education reform are sprouting up everywhere. Spurred on by *A Nation At Risk*, educators have been trying to find the magic formula for preventing dropouts while at the same time producing students who surpass the Germans, Japanese, and everyone else in test scores. Although exciting educational innovations have become institutionalized during the past decade, a cohesive strategy to meet the overwhelming need of our society to successfully educate all of our children is lacking.

Many school reforms have been tried in a hit or miss fashion. Attention to learning styles has opened doors for many children to learn through music and art, kinesthetic activities, and other innovative strategies. Teachers use cooperative learning to provide new opportunities for their students to work together to solve problems in the classroom. Site-based management has given teachers more say in the development of curriculum and its delivery, helping to reinforce their role as professional educators. Active learning, also known as authentic learning, is a way to make learning more relevant to students who see no meaning to daily humdrum assignments. Instead their learning is based on real situations and problems, and the subsequent true learning that takes place is more lasting and meaningful to the students.

As we look at these various educational reform measures, we know that they can be effective. Unfortunately, they often are not used consistently if used at all. There is a need for a cohesive way to deliver these effective teaching strategies. Happily, there is a pedagogy which is able to coordinate these and other positive educational methods. It is known as service learning, it naturally incorporates these varied instructional reforms, it is effective with all students, and its potential for transforming our educational system is enormous.

Definition: What is service learning? The Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform, a network of service-learning leaders from across the United States, defines service learning as "a method by which young people learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully-organized service experiences that

- meet actual community needs;
- are coordinated in collaboration with the school and community;
- are integrated into each young person's academic curriculum;
- provide structured time for a young person to think, talk, and write about what he/she did and saw during the actual service activity;
- provide opportunities to use newly acquired academic skills and knowledge in "real life" situations in their communities;

- enhance what is taught in the school by extending student learning beyond the classroom; and
- help foster the development of a sense of caring for others” (Alliance, 1993).

Rationale: Service learning enriches the educational experience of all students. Evaluations of students involved in service learning show much personal growth. For example, students who work with senior citizens or who tutor at-risk children become more self-confident. They develop a sense of usefulness and purpose often lacking in their lives. They become responsible young people as they develop personal values and beliefs that reflect good character.

The social growth of students who participate with their classmates in coordinating a school-wide recycling project can be quite remarkable. Working with a team of students helps them develop communication skills, not only among themselves, but with others with whom they come in contact. Leadership skills, interpersonal skills, and the ability to work cooperatively with others are truly enhanced by such an experience. Young people have a need for group belonging and identity, and this need is met when participating in the service project. Working on the project with others who are of different cultural backgrounds further expands their social development.

Students gain intellectually as well. Substantial cognitive growth occurs when students work together with their elder buddies to conduct research within their local communities to write a local oral history. The problem-solving and decision-making skills stretch and challenge students when they become advocates for their senior-citizen friends' need for public transportation. The application of the knowledge they acquire in the classroom to these real life situations makes for deep and long-lasting learning, the real goal of education.

Since we live in a democracy, the obligation of our schools, as described by the third National Goal, is to prepare our young people for active citizenship (National Education Goals, 1991). Our future as a nation depends on it. Just as the successful fledgling swimmer must actually get in the water and “just do it,” so does the successful future citizen need practice in citizenship activities. Service learning provides students with opportunities to make a real difference in their communities, with real people and real settings. If students have researched the need for a bicycle path on a major road in their community and have prepared a presentation for the city council, imagine their feelings of accomplishment as they see that bicycle path come into being. Many skills are developed during the service-learning process including organizational skills and social action skills. In addition, students become empowered as

they learn they can make a difference, and they develop a sense of responsibility to their communities and society.

Preparing students for the world of work is a significant outcome of service-learning experiences. Students who have spent the year working as aides in a nursing home have developed human service skills, learned how to follow directions and function as the member of a team, and acquired such working skills as punctuality, professionalism, and regular attendance. They also have had a window on possible careers in the health field, gaining contacts and references for future jobs or educational opportunities.

Essential Components: There are four essential components of a service-learning program: preparation, action, reflection, and celebration.

Preparation consists of the activities that take place prior to the student's service. Here the teacher acts as guide and facilitator. The teacher provides opportunities for students to identify and assess problems in their community. Arranging for community agencies to discuss their work with the students is one way to arouse interest in a project.

Once students have selected a project, they must plan their participation in the service. Training is essential for most service projects, whether it means learning how to tutor and plan learning experiences for first graders, understanding how to complete assigned tasks at a nursing home, or how to transplant flowers for a beautification project. Teachers work with agency personnel in providing these experiences for their students.

Action is the service itself. Although all service activities provide a good foundation for learning, long sustained service provides the optimal experience for young people.

There are three types of action: direct, indirect, and civic action or advocacy.

Direct action requires personal contact with the people in need or a hands-on experience. It could include working in a soup kitchen, helping in the Special Olympics, or planting shrubs in a park.

Indirect action is commonly implemented in schools. These activities involve channeling resources to the problem. Examples include raising money with a bike-a-thon for muscular dystrophy or collecting cans of food for an emergency food shelf.

Civic action is at the heart of democratic citizenship. It involves working to eliminate the causes of a specific problem and to inform the public about the issues surrounding the problem. Students may petition the local government to bring about

political change, whether it be about zoning or after-school care for the community's children.

Reflection is the component that enables students to critically think about their service experience. Students need to be able to describe what they have done and derive some meaning from the experience. They need to be given opportunities for self-expression, whether through group discussions, journal entries, or the development of a project. For successful service learning to take place, students must gain an understanding of the issues related to their service project and utilize the academic skills learned in the classroom. Teachers have the responsibility to facilitate this process, so they must learn strategies for successful reflection.

Celebration sounds like a lightweight component of service learning—it is anything but. Celebration not only brings closure to the service activity; it also provides the school and community the opportunity to place a value on what the students are doing. Society shows what it values by providing awards and recognition. For years most schools have presented awards for academic and athletic achievement. Students get the message that these things are important to their parents and community. The same high value should be placed on volunteerism and contributions to the community. We must show our young people that we consider what they are doing in their service activities is very important.

Curriculum integration: Service learning can be incorporated into the learning experience of all students in a variety of ways. After-school clubs have frequently been the vehicle for the service activities of young people. Most secondary schools have such organizations, and they can be good starting points for further infusion of service into a school's educational process. Students participating in a project to tutor elementary at-risk kids can develop writing skills as they design and write children's books for the children to read.

Teachers can begin to integrate service learning into a curricular units. For example, in a social studies unit on the Depression, students might visit elderly people in need of company and learn from them what their experiences were like in the 1930s. An oral history project such as this could be a tremendous learning experience while at the same time providing a much needed service.

School-wide integration of service learning gives teachers a built-in opportunity to enhance their curriculum. If the school has adopted a local park for its service project, teachers from all disciplines can find numerous ways to plug into the learning that is taking place. Students in science courses can learn about a variety of plants,

and actually plant and maintain them. Math students can make bar graphs noting the use of the park by different age groups. Social studies students can develop historical markers teaching park visitors about the local community's history. Language Arts classes can write letters to the editor of the local newspaper and local civic groups to obtain support for a park beautification process.

Many secondary schools are offering courses in Civic Responsibility, a course in the social studies curriculum that offers a Carnegie Unit. In this course, students select service projects as they learn about such issues as poverty, health, education needs, economics, the environment, and local community and school concerns. Students have shown they have the leadership capability to make a difference in their communities as they learn how our democratic society works.

Research: As educators, we want to know if there is evidence of a pedagogy's success. There is substantial qualitative data indicating that participation in service learning fosters social, personal, and academic development. Conrad and Hedin's (1991) extensive review shows that participants gained a heightened sense of personal and social responsibility and more positive attitudes toward adults and others. Personal development outcomes show more active exploration of careers, enhanced self-esteem, and growth in moral and ego development by participants. Intellectual outcomes included greater mastery of skills and content directly related to the experiences of the participants and more complex patterns of thought.

The National Scene: Bipartisan support of service learning first produced the 1990 National and Community Service Act followed by the 1993 National and Community Service Trust Act. This recent legislation established the Corporation for National and Community Service. Under its umbrella, schools are eligible for Learn and Serve America grants for initiating and implementing service-learning projects in their schools and communities.

Through service learning, educators have a wonderful opportunity to expand their classroom walls by going out into the community or bringing community experts into the schools. Moreover, teachers and their students can become the beneficiaries of services provided to their classrooms by older students. The foundation for the rebuilding of a community can also be established through service learning.

The Role of the Teacher Educator: Teachers in schools today are learning about service learning during in-service days, special training institutes, conferences

and workshops. Teacher educators need to become leaders in this learning process, enriching it by providing courses at both the graduate level and undergraduate level.

Graduate courses taught over the summer give current teachers an opportunity to learn an exciting new strategy and revitalize their teaching. Undergraduate courses will better prepare our future teachers for being involved in this challenging and creative methodology. Providing service learning as an integral part of methods courses will give student teachers ample opportunities to develop the necessary skills to implement successful service-learning instruction in their future teaching positions. In addition, the incorporation of service learning into a student-teaching assignment will further enhance the teacher preparation program, giving students experience in working with the community to educate our children.

Conclusion: Is service learning the magic formula for education reform that its proponents claim? Major evaluation studies are underway which will try to determine the extent of its impact on students, both quantitatively and qualitatively. For the present, however, we will have to ask ourselves if it makes sense to incorporate service learning into our schools.

When service learning is analyzed, observers note the positive benefits for students, teachers, schools, and communities. With its capacity to motivate students, reinvigorate teachers, generate enthusiasm for school, and revitalize the community, service learning is a "win-win" situation. Teacher educators need to learn more about the process that is taking hold nationally in order to guide our current and future teachers in the correct practices of service learning.

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