

# What Is Service-Learning?

## A Teacher's Guide

“Service-Learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.

Through service-learning, young people—from kindergarteners to college students—use what they learn in the classroom to solve real-life problems. They not only learn the practical applications of their studies, they become actively contributing citizens and community members through the service they perform.

Service-learning can be applied in a wide variety of settings, including schools, universities, and community-based and faith-based organizations. It can involve a group of students, a classroom or an entire school. Students build character and become active participants as they work with others in their school and community to create service projects in areas such as education, public safety, and the environment.

Community members, students, and educators everywhere are discovering that service-learning offers all its participants a chance to take part in the active education of youth while simultaneously addressing the concerns, needs, and hopes of communities.

### What Service-Learning Looks Like

If school students collect trash out of an urban streambed, they are providing a valued service to the community as

volunteers. If school students collect trash from an urban streambed, analyze their findings to determine the possible sources of pollution, and share the results with residents of the neighborhood, they are engaging in service-learning.

In the service-learning example, in addition to providing an important service to the community, students are learning about water quality and laboratory analysis, developing an understanding of pollution issues, and practicing communications skills. They may also reflect on their personal and career interests in science, the environment, public policy or other related areas. Both the students and the community have been involved in a transformative experience.”

-- *National Service-Learning Clearinghouse*

### What is High-Quality Service-Learning?

We all know that service learning has a number of benefits to young people, but only if done correctly. High-quality service-learning programs promote academic success, character development, and often are the beginning steps for a young person's lifetime of commitment to the community.

#### *Academic Success*

These effects on young people are found only with high quality service learning that makes a clear connection

to academic success. In theory, service-learning allows students to explore how academic studies can be applied to solving real-world community issues. Research has gone on to say that students learn best when given some control over their learning environment.

Moreover, students must also be engaged in challenging cognitive reflection activities. Students must leverage problem-solving, analysis, and evaluations in their service-learning experience. Thus, students (and adults too) are able to acquire knowledge and skills and then move what they learn from short-term to longer-term memory because they have synthesized, organized, and elaborated on their discoveries.

### *Character Development*

When done correctly, service-learning programs are one of the best ways to facilitate character development, a sense of ethics, conflict resolution, cooperation with others, altruism, self-confidence, efficacy, and helping behaviors. In these cases, teachers must help students identify the character trait students are practicing while in the act. Recognizing this aloud allows students to make connections between the work they are doing and the skills they are learning. Establishing tasks that force students to work together for completion promotes character development as does exposure to positive adult role models. Finally, student voice makes a difference.

### *Civic Engagement*

Students tend to develop their civic skills after participating in high quality service-learning programs. Public speaking, decision-making, letter writing, and keeping up with current events are all skills youth should have practiced. They acquire knowledge on how political decisions are made, how

government operates, and their role in societal processes. They increase their engagement including feeling responsible for the school and community, feeling like they belong to a community, and wanting to make a difference.

Better outcomes are associated with more hands-on experiences, sufficient program duration (at least one semester), teacher experience with service-learning, student choice of project, and the use of multiple action learning strategies.

