

Service-Learning and Civic Education Connecting Methodologies for Effective Citizenship

by

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Service-learning and civic education. Each aspires to create a world of responsible, actively engaged citizens. Both promote instructional programming designed to enhance academic achievement, engage students in participatory activities to address public issues, value student voice and reflection, and foster civic responsibility. The convergence of goals and philosophies of service-learning and civic education contributes greatly to the moral, social, and political fabric of our society. However, there is much disparity regarding the theory and practice of each of these pedagogies as programming is developed and implemented, causing potential areas of conflict and confusion in the field.

The Civic Mission of Schools Report developed by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and Carnegie Corporation of New York, in consultation with the Corporation for National and Community Service and a coalition of over 40 organizations asserts that public education has a *civic mission* to prepare informed, rational, humane, and participating citizens committed to the values and principles of American constitutional democracy (2003).

The future of our democracy depends on our collective ability to create a citizenry that is:

- *Informed* about the history and the fundamental principles of American democracy;
- *Skilled* in communicating, problem solving and equipped with strategies to effectively participate in civil society;
- *Committed* to civic virtues such as equal rights, tolerance, respect and the capacity to make a difference;
- *Actively engaged* in community action and political processes to solve problems and protect the rights and interests of the citizenry.

These civic outcomes correspond with the goals and objectives we hope to achieve across the curriculum in K-12 education and not restricted to the history-social science classroom. The Civic Mission of Schools Report identifies “Six Promising Approaches to Civic Education” proven to develop competent and responsible citizens. Service-learning, identified as a “promising approach” is embraced by educators as an instructional strategy that utilizes community service to increase academic achievement and foster civic responsibility.

Service-learning was clearly defined in the National and Community Service Act of 1990 signed into law by President George Bush. The act, reauthorized in 1993 as the National and Community Service Trust Act, was signed by President Bill Clinton.

The term “service-learning” is defined as a method –

(A) under which students or participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that:

- (i) is conducted in and meets the needs of a community,

- (ii) is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community service program, and with the community; and
 - (iii) helps foster civic responsibility; and
- (B) that
- (i) is integrated into and enhances the (core) academic curriculum of the students, or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled; and
 - (ii) provides structured time for the students or participants to reflect on the service experience.

Service-learning is considered to be “highly effective” when it is designed to meet “real community needs,” improve academic achievement, and include the elements of student voice, reflection, community partnerships. Examples may include:

- Fifth grade students meet their Science standards by learning about the ecosystem and the interdependent system of plant and animal life in the context of their local endangered wetland. Students volunteer hundreds of hours restoring the local wetlands by removing invasive ice plant that threatens the existence of native plant and animal life.
- Middle School students use mathematical skills to design and build playgrounds, community gardens, and handicap accessible ramps and entranceways.
- High School students learn about the effects of water pollution and participate in a “beach clean-up” activity.
- Students in an after-school club learn about the causes and effects of homelessness in their school neighborhoods and tackle issues of hunger and public safety by leading collection drives for local homeless shelters and job training centers.

Students in these examples have acquired academic content knowledge and applied it to real world settings. They develop critical thinking and problem solving skills to meet *real* community needs; many of the virtues recognized as “good citizenship.”

But what happens when the food banks run empty? The ice plant returns to native wetlands? The playgrounds and handicap ramps fall into disrepair? And the beach becomes dirty again? Will there be another group of students or volunteers to solve these community problems? What can be done to address the root causes of local, state, and national problems over the long haul?

Service-learning is not often driven by the need to address *root causes of problems* but instead, explores and activates *solutions* to existing problems. High quality service-learning is extremely effective in providing students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to become effective citizens. By addressing root causes of problems in the context of civic outcomes, service-learning can further maximize the potential for young people to embrace democratic processes to solve real world problems.

The Civic Mission of Schools Report encourages students engaged in service-learning to “consciously pursue civic outcomes, rather than seek only to improve academic performance or to promote higher self-esteem...to pursue political responses to problems consistent with laws that require public schools to be nonpartisan...”

CRITERIA CHECKLIST

To help students embrace democratic processes to achieve civic outcomes to real world problems, practitioners should consider the following criteria when developing service-learning programs:

- Identify problems that are connected to current issues in contemporary society.
- Interact with civic institutions (i.e. government agencies, non-profit organizations) and community leaders (i.e. government officials, legislators) to define the problem, identify and analyze existing policies, and explore possible civic solutions.
- Discover the root causes of an identified problem for the purpose of developing a solution that can eliminate the problem entirely or be sustained over long periods of time.
- Examine current policies that address this issue.
 - Do policies exist?
 - If so, are they effective? Why or why not?
- Research a variety of solutions that include civic responses.
- Introduce public policies to address the root causes of the problem.
- Develop partnerships/collaborations with local legislators, community groups and individuals to garner support for policy change.

Why is this important? Every minute of every day issues of free speech, equity, access, civil liberties, and freedoms home and abroad penetrate our lives and the lives of our children. Yet numerous reports inform us that increasing numbers of Americans are becoming disengaged from civic and political institutions such as voluntary associations, religious congregations, and community-based organizations (Putnam, 2000). Only half of young people surveyed in 2002 stated that they discussed politics, government, or current events with their parents (down from 57% in 1998) (National Association of Secretaries of State, 2002).

The *Civic Mission of Schools* provides authentic, meaningful learning for students across all content areas. It fosters academic achievement, high level critical thinking and life long learning that enables young people to realize their role as effective citizens in a democratic society. Service-learning, designed to explore and pursue political responses to community needs institutionalizes long-term public policy solutions while providing young people with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to embrace democratic processes needed to sustain the health and well-being of our American democracy.

Service-Learning ← Civic Education

Community Need	Traditional Service Learning Response	Civic Response
Neighborhood youth joining gangs.	Gang intervention and prevention program developed to provide alternative activities for young people including toy gun exchange for book program, beautification projects.	Investigate various reasons why young people are joining gangs. Interact with local community leaders to analyze current policies regarding gangs. Explore policy solutions with city council or school board that may include programming that addresses root causes of gang membership and recruitment.
Threat of large-scale bio-terrorist attack.	Program developed to inform community of ideas and resources in the event of a bio-terrorist attack and emergency procedures to follow after one has occurred.	With local community leaders, examine current policy and procedures in the event of a bio-terrorist attack. Introduce public policy to ensure that all members of the community have the information and resources they need in case an attack should occur. Garner support from local agencies and organizations to adopt and implement policy effectively.
Increasing numbers of young people smoking cigarettes.	Tobacco prevention program developed by students and presented at school-wide assemblies.	<p>Contact local government, health, and non-profit organizations to investigate current policies and programs that address smoking and youth. With the assistance of local civic institutions, develop and introduce policy to local school board requiring student voice in the selection and implementation of a tobacco prevention program.</p> <p>With city officials, develop and introduce policy to city council to restrict unlimited smoking in public areas.</p>
Large percentage of students reading below grade level.	Adult Reading Volunteer Program developed to provide one-on-one tutoring to students.	Work with local legislators to allow city employees to volunteer in schools up to four hours a month during work time with compensation.

School/community has few trees or park areas.	Students organize school/community beautification by planting donated trees, flowers, and ground cover.	Interact with city government parks and recreation department to define the problem and identify existing challenges to building more park area in city and schools. With city officials, develop and present policy to local school board/city council to provide ongoing funding for maintenance of trees, plants and park areas.
Abundance of recyclable trash accumulating in trash bins, streets, parks.	Recycling Education Program developed and implemented at school sites.	Connect with city sanitation department to define the problem, analyze existing policies and explore possible solutions. Introduce policy to city council to fund and implement recycling program in city. Program to provide recycle bins, pick-up and proper disposal of recyclable products by city. Work with local non-profit organizations to organize public awareness campaign to help policy work effectively.

References

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