Service Learning & Community Service

Strategy Brief, January, 2015

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Involving students in their community has long been thought of as both valuable and motivating to students in that it provides opportunities for the application of academic, social, and other skills to real world issues and problems occurring in their local environment. Moreover, students may learn civic engagement, establish adult role models and relationships, and be able to contribute positively to their community. Service learning and community service programs aim to accomplish these goals.

What is Service Learning?

Service learning is "...active learning in which young people contribute to their communities" (Kielsmeier, 2011, p. 4) that seeks to "...connect community service with the academic curriculum" (Perkins-Gough, 2009, p. 91). The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network defines service learning as "a teaching and learning method that connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning, personal growth, and civil responsibility" (2011, p. 1).

Tier 1, 2 or 3 Intervention

The Community Service Act of 1990 (42 U.S. Code 12511) that established the Learn and Serve America Program defines service learning as: "*...a method whereby participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that are coordinated through collaboration between the school and community; provide structured time for students to think, talk, and write about what they did and saw during the service activity; provide students with opportunities to use newly acquired academic skills and knowledge in real life situations in their own communities; enhance what is taught in the school by extending student learning beyond the classroom; and help foster development of a sense of caring for others*" (as cited by the NDPC, 2011, p. 1).

What is community service?

Community service occurs when individuals provide voluntary assistance to benefit a community. This can be provided by individuals or organizations, such as schools, and can be directed at a wide array of types of assistance within the community. The community assistance, for example, might vary from donating time to cleaning up parks or public areas, to painting or providing maintenance for buildings, to assisting in soup kitchens or other community or non-profit agencies. Community service is associated with the larger "volunteerism" movement, which

suggests that every citizen should devote some time to community service activities. Community service is allocated or measured based on the number of volunteers and the amount of time the volunteers provide. Similar work performed by law offenders to serve out a court ordered sentence in lieu of other consequences is also called community service.

Comparing Community Service and Service Learning

Like service learning, community service is usually supervised and directed at specific tasks. However, service learning differs from regular community service in that it is tied to academic goals (and curriculum), and explicitly encourages students to reflect on their experiences (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Wulsin, 2008). Service learning focuses on the learning of the service volunteer. Community service is more focused on the outcome for the community measured by the amount of time or work provided. Common measures are the number of community service volunteers, the number of hours donated, and the value in dollars of the work contributed. The value of community service is embodied in the phrase "volunteering and civic engagement are the cornerstone of a strong na-

tion." (volunteeringinamerica.gov).

School Programs. Service learning and community service programs may be organized differently depending on the age of the students. For instance, at the elementary or middle school level, service learning opportunities may be offered throughout an entire grade or school-wide, but at the high school level, service learning may be offered only as an elective or in specific classes (Billig, 2008). Regardless of the developmental or educational level, service learning programs should actively engage students throughout the planning and implementation process.

Many middle and high schools, as well as colleges and universities may have community service requirements for students. Some schools require a number of clock hours of such community service as a seperate graduation requirement or as a requirement for earning credit towards graduation. These programs often have specific activities or charities where students volunteer to provide service. Fewer schools may have a structured service learning program. While community service opportunities may have many similarities to service learning, they may not emphasize the interconnection to academic curriculum, and may not monitor outcomes as formally as for service learning programs, but instead they focus on the character development of the student contributing to the community.

As mentioned earlier the courts have sometimes assigned community service hours or tasks as an alternative to incarceration, fines, or other consequences for law violations. Similarly, some schools have used community service

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as an alternative to the use of other disciplinary consequences for student misbehavior. For some disciplinary violations, students might be assigned a certain number of documented hours of community service under the supervision of a designated supervisor.

Service Learning Programs

The remainder of this document will focus primarily on service learning programs in schools. Nevertheless, community service programs, while less structured, may be provided in ways similar to service learning programs and have parallel components.

Components of Service Learning Programs

Several specific components of service learning experiences have been identified that meet best practice criteria for these types of programs. Billig (2008) argues that service learning should follow the "IPARD/C model." In this model the letters in the name of the model indicates stages of service learning which many have deemed important to effective service learning. These stages include: 1) Investigate, 2) Prepare & Plan, 3) Action, 4) Reflection and 5) Demonstration/Celebration. Variations of this model have been identified in the literature. For instance, Dymond, Renzaglia, and Chun (2007) identified other important components such as authentic context, link to the regular school curriculum, individual student assessment of

learning, and program evaluation. Progress monitoring to continually assess student learning and program goals are necessary as well. Additionally, the National Dropout Prevention Center and others have indicated that service learning programs should contain the following elements (NDPC, 2011; Shumer & Duckenfield, 2004, p. 141):

- It is reciprocal in that students and those who benefit from the students' services learn from each other;
- Students learn by doing;
- Students reflect on what they are doing through writing and discussion of applications in a real-world context;
- It is interesting and exciting because students are the leaders of the project; and
- Students are engaged in community-based learning projects.

Prevalence of Service Learning in Schools

Although the potential benefits of service learning are known, service-learning opportunities are, unfortunately, not common in schools today. In other words, it is not a core component of education in the United States. In a large survey cited by Perkins-Gough (2009), 16% of students reported that service-learning was offered at their schools. This number is lower than Bridgeland and colleagues' (2008), who reported that 30% of schools offer service-learning. Overall, the percentage of schools that offer service learning opportunities is approximately 25%, although it may be declining (David, 2009; Kielsmeier, 2011). Unsurprisingly, the highest rates of service learning are present in high schools as opposed to elementary and middle schools. It should be noted that community service programs may be more widespread than the more formal service learning programs in schools.

What Are the Expected Outcomes of Service Learning Programs?

Service-learning and community service are associated with many positive outcomes for

students, particularly those students in middle school, and for members of the community (NDPC, 2011, p. 1). Given the dropout crisis, some findings indicate that service learning could increase student engagement, which is linked to remaining in school through graduation. In fact, the most common reasons for dropping out of school relate to boredom and disaffection. As a result, service learning may be a way to connect students to school and to the community (NDPC, 2011). Service learning is thought to be in line with what students are envisioning for their education. For instance, Perkins-Gough (2009) states that in one large-scale survey of approximately 800 high school students, 75% rated service learning experiences as more interesting than traditional instruction. Also, consistent with student engagement is the finding that service learning can increase students' intrinsic motivation to learn (Dedmond & Kestler, 2010). These authors assert that service learning makes learning meaningful and enriches the learning process.

help students achieve academic goals, but allow them to learn about different cultures and to increase their awareness of various social classes (Pleasants, Stephens, Selph, & Pfeiffer, 2004). According to David (2009), civic responsibility increases as a result of increased awareness of social problems. Service learning outcomes are considerably improved if civic leadership and responsibility is emphasized in these programs as opposed to community service alone.

Overall, service learning is beneficial because it addresses student needs as well as the needs of whom the student is working with. The aforementioned evidence indicates that service learning promotes growth in leadership and offers abundant opportunities to "give back" to society. Additionally, Billig (2000) provides a summary of potential benefits that have been cited in the literature including stronger bonds with adults, greater empathy and awareness of cultural differences, newfound desires to be politically active, and an increase in school attendance. Arguably most important is the pos-

Furthermore, service learning may help shape students' personal and career interests and offer an avenue for students to pursue topics that they find relevant for their future. Similarly, service learning has been linked to higher academic achievement, career awareness, citizenship, and improved personal/social adjustment (Billig, 2002; Dedmond & Kestler, 2010). A correlation also exists between students' heightened awareness of the community around them. Service learning projects not only

sibility that service learning could significantly contribute to dropout prevention efforts due to increases in student engagement.

Service Learning & Special Education

Service learning may be beneficial for students with disabilities and at-risk students in general (Follman, 1998; O'Bannon, 1999). It has been related to reductions in teen pregnancy (Kirby, 2001; Melchior, 1999), increased likeli-

hood of voting and becoming politically active (Morgan & Streb, 2001), and appears to help youth transition successfully from childhood to adulthood (NDPC, 2011). Students who are verified as having an emotional disturbance are at highest risk for dropping out of high school, followed by those with specific learning disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Therefore, it is important to consider how special education students in particular could benefit from service learning or community service programs. Results from a study conducted by Muscott (2000) suggest that service learning can empower students who have emotional or behavioral issues, and can help foster their self-control. Given these findings, explicit attempts should be made to make service learning opportunities readily available to special education student populations despite the misconception that they may not be capable or willing to participate. On the contrary, they may be the most likely population to be interested in these opportunities since they make school seem more relevant and meaningful. In other words, service learning may serve as a protective factor for special education students who are at-risk to become disengaged and drop out of school.

Current Research on Service Learning

Much of the literature is focused on service learning in advanced education and its use in college courses. For instance, service learning is thought to foster skills in nursing, business, and education, to name a few. There is much less literature on K-12 applications of service learning. Unfortunately, current studies are more focused on establishing a correlation instead of causal relationship between service learning and outcomes such as graduation rates, attendance, and engagement. For example, findings from one study have identified opportunities for reflection and faculty support as mediating variables that suggest an indirect relationship between service-learning and positive student outcomes (Astin, Vogelgesa, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000). However, Bridgeland and colleagues (2008) state that there are "...no studies that specifically investigate how and why service learning is related to graduation rates..." which makes it difficult to draw conclusions and correlations between service learning and lower dropout rates. Likewise, Muscott (2000) argues that the literature in the area of service learning is limited to only anecdotal evidence supporting the

social validity of such programs. For instance, survey studies often ask about students' potential interest in these programs as opposed to measuring objective outcomes for students who have already participated.

Due to the lack of causal evidence supporting service-learning and methodological concerns with existing studies, more rigorous studies that utilize longitudinal investigations and randomized control trials are warranted in the future (Billig, 2000; Bridgeland et al., 2008). However, since these programs are often locally created, tailored to student, school and community needs and often have differing intended outcome measures, it is difficult to implement large controlled longitudinal studies. As a result, it is difficult to classify service learning as an evidence-based intervention, in spite of the fact that many individual reports suggest positive outcomes from service learning programs.

Two Examples of Specific Service Learning Programs

The two programs described below were chosen as examples due to the availability of descriptive materials, and since they illustrate the types of service learning programs which have been created.

Duke Talent Identification Program (TIP) Leadership Institute. This is a service learning program intended for gifted students in particular (Pleasants et al., 2004). This program allows students to identify an area of need in the community and design a project related to addressing it, and operates under the assumption that

leadership skills can be explicitly taught. Therefore, the first stage of the program requires students to explore leadership theory and delve into research on these topics. Planning stages follow to allow students to practice skills like persuasion and prioritizing. Next, students meet with local service providers (e.g., a panel of different individuals in the community). Once ideas are generated, student presentations are given to describe what they hope to accomplish before implementing their programs, and feedback is received. Examples of past projects include working at the Ronald McDonald House, building houses in Nicaragua, and working at a shelter for children and women who have been subjected to abuse. At the end of the process, students critique their service projects and participate in self-analysis.

Skills for Action. Skills for Action is described by What Works Clearinghouse (2006) as a program for high school students. It consists of 100 lessons and its length varies from one semester to all four years of high school. The lessons are supplemented by community (or school-based) service experiences and reflection. The service learning projects and lessons are integrated into the curriculum. Basically, students can be placed in existing service agencies or may work together to come up with a goal and projects that meet community needs. Discussions and writing activities relating to what they experienced are also incorporated.

Challenges and Recommendations

Unsurprisingly, there are barriers that schools must overcome in order to implement service learning or community service pro-

grams. One of the most cited challenges is the belief that these programs will be distracting or irrelevant to core academic skills that students must acquire before graduation- that it will take time away from the acquisition of these skills. Similarly, Tonn (2005) asserts that the math and reading goals instated by No Child Left Behind have resulted in stricter guidelines for how time is allocated throughout the school day. In other words, schools need to meet required educational standards, which places constraints on the kinds of activities they can pursue in order to meet academic goals (Dedmond & Kestler, 2010).

Furthermore, resources (both monetary as well as staff who can take the lead in running service-learning courses or initiatives) are required for service-learning to flourish. Not all schools have these resources nor staff "buy-in" available to devote to service-learning initiatives. This is disheartening since schools who do not currently offer service-learning opportunities often need them the most due to higher at-risk student populations (i.e., low SES, minority) who are more likely to drop out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2008). However, the less structured community service programs may provide learning opportunities as well as establishing connections between students and other community members and programs.

Moreover, additional research studies are needed to see whether service-learning or community service programs actually increases academic achievement and graduation rates, as opposed to simply correlational studies (Perkins-Gough, 2009). Future research designs should instead utilize longitudinal and randomized control trials (with control group comparisons) to identify causal variables. If results from these studies demonstrate that service-learning is effective, it may be easier to establish buy-in and receive federal funding and policy initiatives to implement these programs more prevalently. In light of these challenges and preliminary evidence that supports service-learning, the following recommendations are made from both a research and school perspective:
• Establish ties to the community and explore whether community agencies and organiza-

tions are interested in collaborating with students.
• Utilize rigorous research designs while investigating whether service-learning is responsible for positive student outcomes, particularly with at-risk youth.
• Designate service-learning coordinators who are responsible for organizing and taking the lead on service-learning programs.
• Explicitly tie service-learning projects to academic goals and objectives.

Conclusion

It is clear that service learning and community service programs in schools may promote student engagement and bolster attempts to reduce school dropout, particularly for at risk or struggling students. Additional benefits include improved leadership skills and increased appreciation for community needs and civic responsibility and engagement. However, offering service learning or community service opportunities is not a common practice in schools today, and many question the relevance it has to students' academic achievement needed for postsecondary education. Moreover, the push towards schools spending more time on academic instruction seems to diminish opportunities for service learning in schools. More rigorous research methods are needed to establish a causal relationship between service learning and positive student outcomes, which may lead the way for policy initiatives that explicitly incorporate service learning into the typical school day. Given that community service is less structured there is even less rigorous evidence supporting its use. Nevertheless, strong community values which support volunteerism and contributions to the community as well as anecdotal and testimonial evidence do tend to strongly support the value of these programs, particularly for students who are at risk of school failure or who have disabilities.

Recommended Citation:

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