

The Impact of Service-Learning on Youth, Schools and Communities: Research on K-12 School-Based Service Learning, 1990-1999

(This research brief was developed by Shelley H. Billig, Ph.D., RMC Research Corporation, Denver, CO, as part of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Learning In Deed Initiative. A full bibliography of all sources cited here is available at www.learningindeed.org or by calling Learning In Deed at (202) 778-1040.)

Service-learning is a teaching strategy that links community service experiences to classroom instruction. This paper briefly presents recent research on the impacts of service-learning on K-12 youth, public schools and communities.

Prevalence of Service-Learning

According to a 1999 survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, 64% of all public schools and 83% of all public high schools organize some form of community service for their students. Nearly a third of all schools and half of public high schools provide service-learning programs, where the service that is being provided is linked with the school curriculum (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999).

Rationale for Use in K-12 Public Schools

Educators are drawn to service-learning because they believe it produces important positive educational results for students, schools and communities. In individual interviews, they can clearly articulate their observations of the effects. They give many examples of students becoming more altruistic and caring, growing more concerned about their community and community issues, and learning more in specific content areas such as social studies or mathematics, or specific subject matter such as environment or the elderly (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999; Billig and Conrad, 1997; Duckenfield and Swanson, 1992; Eyler and Giles, 1998; Kinsley and McPherson, 1995; and many others).

Evidence of Impact

The research in the field has not caught up with the certainty and passion that educators feel for service-learning. What is available, though, begins to build a case for the impacts that practitioners believe to be true. This summary presents the past decade (1990-1999) of research on K-12 service-learning, organized by area of potential impact. It does not include all research on the topic, but rather is limited to those publications that have documented their results and have shown a positive impact. It is important to note that at the time of this writing, no research

was identified with negative impacts, and only a few studies showed no impact or no sustained impact over time. A fuller treatment, including a critical analysis of this literature, will be summarized in a Learning In Deed brief to be published May, 2000.

The Impact of Service-Learning on Youth Personal and Social Development

Service-learning has a positive effect on the personal development of public school youth

- Middle and high school students who engaged in quality service-learning programs showed increases in measures of personal and social responsibility, communication, and sense of educational competence (Weiler, LaGoy, Crane, and Rovner, 1998);
- Students who engaged in service-learning ranked responsibility as a more important value and reported a higher sense of responsibility to their school than comparison groups (Leming, 1998);
- Students perceive themselves to be more socially competent after engaging in service-learning (Scales and Blyth, 1997; O'Bannon, 1999; Morgan and Streb, 1999);
- Students who engaged in service-learning were more likely to treat each other kindly, help each other, and care about doing their best (Berkas, 1997);
- Students who engaged in service-learning were more likely to increase their sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Shaffer, 1993);
- Middle school male students reported increased self-esteem and fewer behavioral problems after engaging in service-learning (Switzer, Simmons, Dew, Regalski, and Wang, 1995).

Students who participate in service-learning are less likely to engage in "risk" behaviors.

- Students in elementary and middle school service-learning programs showed reduced levels of alienation and behavioral problems (Stephens, 1995; Yates and Youniss, 1996);
- Students who engaged in service-learning were less likely to be referred to the office for disciplinary measures (Follman, 1997, 1998);
- High school and middle school students who were engaged in service-learning were less likely to engage in behaviors that lead to pregnancy or arrest (Melchior, 1999; Allen, Kuperminc, Philliber, and Herre, 1994; Shaffer, 1993);
- Middle school students who engaged in service-learning and experienced a structured health curriculum were less likely to engage in unprotected sexual activity or violent behavior (O'Donnell, Strueve, Doval, Duran, Haber, Atnafou, Johnson, Grant, Murray, Juhn, Tang, and Piessens, 1999).

Service-learning has a positive effect on students' interpersonal development and the ability to relate to culturally diverse groups.

- Middle and elementary school students who participated in service-learning were better able to trust and be trusted by others, be reliable, and accept responsibility (Stephens, 1995);
- High school students who participated in high quality service-learning programs were more likely to develop bonds with more adults, agreed that they could learn from and work with the elderly and disabled, and felt that they had trusted others besides parents and teachers to whom they could turn for help (Morgan and Streb, 1999);
- Students who engaged in service-learning showed greater empathy and cognitive complexity than comparison groups (Courneya, 1994);
- Students who engaged in quality service-learning programs reported greater acceptance of cultural diversity (Melchoir, 1999; Berkas, 1997);
- Students who engaged in service-learning showed increases over time in their awareness of cultural differences and attitudes toward helping others (Shaffer, 1993; Stephens, 1995);
- Students who participated in service-learning enjoyed helping others with projects, became more dependable and felt more comfortable communicating with ethnically diverse groups (Loesch-Griffin, Petrides, and Pratt, 1995).

The Impact of Service-Learning on Civic Responsibility

Service-learning helps to develop students' sense of civic and social responsibility and their citizenship skills.

- Students who engage in high quality service-learning programs showed an increase in the degree to which they felt aware of community needs, believed that they could make a difference and were committed to service now and later in life (Melchior, 1999; Berkas, 1997);
- High school students who participated in high quality service-learning programs developed more sophisticated understandings of sociohistorical contexts, were likely to think about politics and morality in society, and were likely to consider how to effect social change (Yates and Youniss, 1996; 1998);
- Elementary and middle school students who participated in service-learning developed a greater sense of civic responsibility and ethic of service (Stephens, 1995);
- Students who engage in service-learning increased their understanding of how government works (Berkas, 1997).

Service-learning provides an avenue for students to become active, positive contributors to society.

- High school students who participated in service-learning and service are more likely to be engaged in a community organization and are more likely to vote 15 years after their participation in the program than those who did not participate (Youniss, McClellan, and Yates, 1997; Yates and Youniss, 1998);
- High school students from five states who participated in high quality service-learning programs increased their political attentiveness, political knowledge and desire to become more politically active (Morgan and Streb, 1999);
- Students who engage in service-learning feel that they can “make a difference” (O’Bannon, 1999; Cairn, 1999);
- Over 80% of participants in high quality service-learning programs felt that they had made a positive contribution to the community (Melchior, 1999; Billig and Conrad, 1997).

Impact of Service-Learning on Academic Learning

Service-learning helps students acquire academic skills and knowledge.

- Students in over half of the high quality service-learning schools studied showed moderate to strong positive gains on student achievement tests in language arts and/or reading, engagement in school, sense of educational accomplishment, and homework completion (Weiler, LaGoy, Crane, and Rovner, 1998);
- Service-learning participation was associated with higher scores on the state test of basic skills (Anderson, Kinsley, Negroni, and Price, 1991) and higher grades (Shumer, 1994; Shaffer, 1993; Dean and Murdock, 1992; O’Bannon, 1999);
- 83% of schools with service-learning programs reported that grade point averages of participating service-learning students improved 76% of the time (Follman, 1999);
- Middle and high school students who participated in service-learning tutoring programs increased their grade point averages and test scores in reading/language arts and math, and were less likely to drop out of school (Supik, 1996; Rolzinski, 1990);
- Students who engaged in service-learning came to class on time more often, completed more classroom tasks and took the initiative to ask questions more often (Loesch-Griffin, Petrides, and Pratt, 1995);
- Elementary and middle school students who participated in service-learning had improved problem-solving skills and increased interest in academics (Stephens, 1995).

Students who participate in service-learning are more engaged in their studies and more motivated to learn.

- Students who participated in high quality service-learning programs showed an increase in measures of school engagement and achievement in mathematics than control groups (Melchior, 1999);
- Students at all levels felt that they learned more in service-learning classes than other classes (Weiler, LaGoy, Crane, Rovner, 1998; Berkas, 1997).

Service-learning is associated with increased student attendance.

- Schools that sponsor service-learning program reported that attendance increased every year over a three year period of time (Follman, 1998; 1999; O'Bannon, 1999);
- Students engaged in service-learning had higher attendance rates than control group peers (Shaffer, 993; Supik, 1996; Shumer, 1994).

The Impact of Service-Learning on Communities

Service-learning leads to more positive perceptions of school and youth by community members.

- Community members who participate in service-learning as partners with the school see youth as valued resources and positive contributors to community (Billig and Conrad, 1997; 1999; Weiler, LaGoy, Crane, and Rovner, 1999; Melchior, 1999; Kingland, Richards, and Coleman, 1995; Kinsley, 1997).

The Impact of Service-Learning on Career Exploration and Aspirations

Service-learning helps students to become more knowledgeable and realistic about careers.

- Students who participated in service-learning reported gaining career skills, communication skills, and positive increases in career exploration knowledge (Berkas, 1997; Billig, Jesse, Calvert, and Kleimann, 1999);
- Students who engaged in high quality service-learning programs developed positive work orientation attitudes and skills (Weiler, LaGoy, Crane, and Rovner, 1998);
- Teachers believed that participation in service-learning increases career awareness (Melchior, 1999; Billig and Conrad, 1997).

The Impact of Service-Learning on Schools

Service-learning results in greater mutual respect of teachers and students.

- Teachers and students in schools with quality service-learning programs reported an increase in mutual respect (Weiler, LaGoy, Crane, and Rovner, 1998);

- Service-learning builds cohesiveness and more positive peer relations among students, among teachers, and between students and teachers in a school (Weiler, LaGoy, Crane, and Rovner, 1998).

Service-learning improves the overall school climate.

- Educators and students in schools with strong service-learning program reported more positive school climate through a feeling of greater connectedness to the school (Billig and Conrad, 1997; Weiler, LaGoy, Crane, and Rovner, 1999) and through decreased teacher turnover and increased teacher collegiality (Weiler, et.al., 1999).

Engaging in service-learning leads to discussions of teaching and learning and best ways for students to learn.

- Service learning promotes dialogue about the best ways that students learn and transfer information in schools that have a ‘critical mass’ (over 20% of teachers) engaged in service-learning (Billig and Conrad, 1997; Melchior, 1999; Kinsley, 1997);
- Educators involved in service-learning engage in ongoing reflection and analysis to determine how to improve educational services to students (Anderson, Kinsley, Negroni, and Price, 1991; Billig and Conrad, 1997).

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