WHY SERVE?

If you're ready to initiate a service learning program with your students and want to know where to begin, you've come to the right place! This section will give you a step-by-step guide to starting a service learning program.

It's important to note that, while there are consistent elements of successful service learning programs, there is not *one* right way to make one work in the classroom. Many of the steps you take will depend on your student population; the support of your administration, parents, and community; and your objectives. Our hope is that this section can be a helpful road map that you can follow exactly, or take in a direction that makes the most sense for you! Before you begin, you may want to review "Things to Consider."

According to service learning researcher and expert Shelly Billig, Ph.D., "Service learning practitioners typically have the same desired outcomes as other educators: Students should be motivated to learn and engage in subject matter, acquire important knowledge and skills, and be able to demonstrate their knowledge and skills on a performance measure. The particular knowledge and skills that students demonstrate depend upon the way that the service and learning experience is planned, implemented, and followed up."

This section reviews eight steps to help you and your students effectively plan, implement, and evaluate your program. Within each step you will be given tips and ideas for practitioners (that's you) and students. Each step also includes ideas for structured reflection, a critical component of the service learning process. Several of the steps also include learning logs to be completed by your students.

Step One: Self-assessment - Students identify their strengths, interests, talents, and experiences.
Step Two: Community assessment - Students explore their community to identify problems and needs.
Step Three: Choose an issue - Students identify one need or problem they'd like to address.
Step Four: Conduct research - Students learn about the need or problem they've identified.
Step Five: Create a plan - Students create a plan of action for service.
Step Six: Implement the plan - Students carry out their service action plan.
Step Seven: Celebration - Students celebrate what they've given and learned.
Step Eight: Evaluation - Students evaluate what they've done and how they could improve it.

While this site was written for educators of students in grades 4-8, the ideas and activities within the eight step areas easily can be adapted for older or younger students and those with different ability levels. Activities also can be adapted for service efforts that will be implemented by an entire district, a class, a small group within the class, an afterschool program, or individual students. Obviously, all aspects of the service experience -- including duration and type of service, desired outcomes, and structured reflection -- should be age and developmentally appropriate.

Students should be responsible for the eight steps of the process, with you serving as the guide or facilitator, and should be at the center of as many decisions as possible. Even if you have students with special needs, their involvement in all stages of the process will help to move them from the passive role of service recipient to the active role of service provider.

STEP BY STEP GUIDE

A primary goal of service learning pioneers was to have students learn knowledge, skills, and self-awareness through structured reflection, so they would be more effective both in their service and throughout their lives.

Reflection is the framework within which students process and synthesize the information and ideas they have gained through their service experience. They analyze concepts, evaluate their experiences, and form opinions.

The service experience alone does not ensure that either significant learning or effective service have occurred. Thoughtful reflection throughout the process encourages students to deliberately think about their role in this project and their role in the larger community. Reflection also provides a connection between the project and the students' academic goals. For students with special needs, it provides teachers and students with a sound way to examine progress toward Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals. Sample reflection questions are included within each step of the process.

Step One: Self-Assessment

With the myriad of service choices, it's important that students first spend some time exploring their own interests, skills, and experiences so they can select a project they will truly enjoy and at which they will be successful. Service learning is not about "assigning" students a service project. It's about empowering them to address an authentic community need that truly interests them.

During this step in the service learning process, students should be encouraged to identify their individual experiences, talents, skills, and interests.

What students can do:
- Have students list their wishes, what they like to do, what their experiences are, and when they've been most successful. See Student Learning Log for ideas.
- Have students interview each other about their skills, interests, and abilities.
- Have students interview other people in their lives to see how others view their talents.
- Have students draw conclusions about how they can impact the community, based on their answers to one or more of these activities.

Ideas for Reflection: Have students write or share things about themselves that make them proud and happy. Based on their answers, have them identify what they can offer to their community.

Step Two: Community Assessment

One of the things that make service learning so valuable to students and to the community is that students are addressing an authentic community need. Through the process of identifying this need, students learn they are part of a larger community and that their responsibility as an active citizen is to try to improve that community. When students learn that they can make a real difference, it can be very empowering for them.

What practitioners can do:
- Determine how you will define "community" for this service learning project. Your community could be your school, neighborhood, city, or a larger area such as a state, nation, or the world. All of these "communities" have authentic needs. Your definition may be dictated by your class population or by the transportation options your students will have.
- Determine whether you will provide a list of community needs from which students can choose, if students will be required to reach consensus on a select number of needs, or if individuals or student groups can create their own list. At this point in the process, it's usually important not to restrict or eliminate any student suggestions.
- Brainstorm with students about ways they can learn about the needs of their community. Ideas include observation, newspapers, television news, interviews with family members or community leadership, discussions with experts, statistical research at the local library or Chamber of Commerce, and field trips.
- Invite representatives from community organizations to address your students about their organizations' challenges.

What students can do:
- Brainstorm how they can learn about the needs of their community. See ideas above.
- Brainstorm different categories in which natural needs may fall. Categories may include education, crime, social problems, economy, health, safety, recreation, cleanliness, and the environment.
- List what they already know about their community, and what they'd like to learn more about. The latter list may relate to the interests they identified during the Self-Assessment.
- Survey others in the community to learn different points of view about community needs. Community needs aren't necessarily based solely on statistics.
- Complete the Student Service Log

Ideas for Reflection: Have students list what they think their responsibilities are as part of a community. How do their answers relate to the problems and needs they've uncovered? What would happen if no one cared enough to address these problems?

Step Three: Choose an Issue

After the Community Needs Assessment, students should have a list of community needs or problems. Now they must choose the one need that they would most like to address in their service learning project. If they are working as part of a group, they will need to find one issue or problem on which they'd all like to work. But, how?

There really is no one answer or process for narrowing the list of issues or problems, but there are questions that students can ask themselves.

The issue they ultimately choose should be one that:
- Somehow touches their lives.
- Is an authentic community need.
- Can connect to several learning needs (content standards or school curriculum) and/or their Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

- They will enjoy learning about and impacting.
- They can feasibly impact. For example, students at this age can't necessarily eliminate homelessness, but they can change the fact that homeless people have no coats to wear during the winter months.

What practitioners can do:
- Challenge students to select an issue or problem that fulfills all of the above criteria. Guide them to complete the student log to help during this process. They may need help identifying the learning needs they can meet, but they should and can be part of this process. See "The Standards" for ideas.
- Encourage students to explore diverse problems.
- If student groups are working together to select an issue, you may want to spend some time focusing on what makes a successful group.
- If the class is selecting one issue to impact, think about how you will reach a class consensus.
- Once students have selected their issue, have them present it to the rest of the class, along with a justification for their choice.

What students can do:
- Begin by listing several issues they might want to impact. Then use the Student Log to help them narrow their choices.
- Refer back to their Self-Assessment to ensure they choose something that reflects their interests, talents, and experiences.

Ideas for Reflection
Have students write about the things that influenced their final decision. Was the process easy or difficult? Are they pleased with the final decision?

Step Four: Conduct Research

Now that students have selected their issue, they should spend time learning as much as they can about it from as many different sources as possible. This will help them as they try to determine a plan of action for their service learning.

The specific steps students take during the research phase are really guided by the project they've chosen. However, there is some basic information they will want to learn regardless of the issue. This includes:
- What they already know
- The history of the problem
- The current situation
- What will happen in the future if the problem is not addressed
- What's already been done to address it
- Potential collaborators
- Possibilities for change

This research process is similar to other research processes your students likely have done. In service learning, however, the questions are theirs, the information is authentic, and the answers they get often lead to more questions -- and this is a good thing!

What practitioners can do:
- Help students understand the benefits of learning as much as they can about the issue.
- Give students access to library resources, media, and the Internet.
- Invite experts to the class or set up opportunities for students to talk with experts about the issue.
- If necessary, help students pose questions to which they would like the answers.
- Challenge students along the way to assess whether the problem is too broad or too difficult to address.

What students can do:
- List and answer questions that will help them learn as much as they can about the issue.
- Use a variety of resources.
- Collaborate as much as possible with community members.
- Complete the Student Service Learning Log.

Reflection Ideas: Have students discuss how they felt about the research process, what went well, and what challenges they encountered. What might they do differently if given the chance to repeat the process?

Step Five: Create a Plan

Now that students have identified and learned about an issue, they should be ready to develop an action plan to address it. This is the step in which they create the type of service learning that will address their community need or problem, determine the feasibility of their plan, ensure that it connects to curricular goals and/or their IEPs, and identify the collaborators with whom they'll work.

The plan should be age and developmentally appropriate so that students will feel accomplishment, success, and pride, rather than frustration.

What practitioners can do:
- If the class is working together on one plan, work with students to determine how you'll decide which plan is best.
- Review plans carefully to ensure that they're feasible and safe, and that all challenges have been considered.
- Work with students to connect action plans to curricular goals and/or IEPs. Make sure students understand curricular goals before beginning this process.
- Have groups present their plans to each other to discover whether groups can help each other along the way.

What students can do:
- Brainstorm several ideas for solving the problem, and evaluate at least three. See Student Service Learning Log.
- Explain how their ideas solve or address the community need or problem, and how they will impact others in the community.
- Determine the resources (time, money, transportation, collaborators) they will need to succeed.
- Determine how their action plan connects to their learning goals or IEPs.
- If possible, work with community partners while developing the plan, or present the plan to them. This

will help students see how successful collaborations are built.

Reflection Ideas: Have students discuss what they are most looking forward to about their plan and how they will define success as they implement it.

Step Six: Implement the Plan

The plan is in place. Now it's time to carry it out! This is where you will see your students in action conducting their service learning projects! It likely will be the step that students are most excited, and potentially most nervous, about. But even though students have spent a lot of time and energy developing their plan, they may see that the "doing" part doesn't go exactly as they had planned. It's important that students (and you) are ready for anything! They must be willing to be adventurous, flexible, and resourceful (qualities they'll need throughout their lives) and ready to make adjustments to the initial plan as new information and circumstances arise.

What practitioners can do:
- Make sure students feel comfortable and confident leaving the safety of your classroom to perform their service. They should feel proud of themselves as they walk out the door!
- Talk with students about what it means to give and not to expect anything in return. Remember that students with special needs are used to being on the receiving end of service. If your students have special needs, you will want to make sure they are prepared for the implications of being on the giving end.
- Talk with students about how their plan may change, once their service begins.
- If your students will be working with those outside of the school community, it's important that you have gotten all parent and administrative approval. Equally important is communicating with service recipients, inside and outside of the building, to ensure that you are aware of their expectations and that they are aware of any individual circumstances surrounding their service providers.

What students can do:
- Talk about how they're feeling about performing their service. They likely can learn from each other's feelings.
- Be ready to be spontaneous, flexible, and resourceful.

Ideas for Reflection
Have students share with the class their feelings about the first day of service: How they felt, what they learned, and what was different from their original vision.

Step Seven: Celebration

Celebration is a very important piece of the service learning experience. It shows young people how others value their work and is an important way to say thank you to those involved, affirm partnerships, and renew the commitment to service. In large and small ways, during and after periods of service, participants and projects should be recognized, and participants should celebrate what they've gained and given through service.

Recognition of students can help build habits of service and lead to a lifetime of community involvement. Don't

forget to recognize key community partners as well.

Celebrations can take many forms, but it's often a good idea to let participants play a role in designing their celebration and to include people who are important to the projects and the participants.

Since many types of service learning are ongoing, the celebration does not have to be a culminating activity. It can take place any time students have something to celebrate! It can be as simple as a small event in the classroom or as elaborate as a community affair.

Celebration ideas include:
- A party or reception
- Development of a website, book or video
- A school or community display
- A ceremony
- A press event
- A family night
- Certificates or pins
- Participation in national recognition programs

Step Eight: Evaluation

The evaluation stage is an important part of the process for you, your students, your school, and the community you serve. It can give all stakeholders valuable feedback on student learning as well as the impact of service on those who receive it. It provides a basis for developing and improving the program, and documents a program's effectiveness for administration, parents and the community.

But, where do you start?

The evaluation process should flow naturally from your curricular objectives. Its form can be quantitative, such as service learning logs, hours of service, number of people served, gains in test scores, or surveys. It also can be qualitative, such as observation, reflection logs, or interviews with key participants.

As with all steps of the service learning process, students should be involved in its evaluation. They should be able to articulate the impact service learning has had on them and on those they've served.

A thorough evaluation asks all stakeholders to ask themselves whether this process met their goals. Questions can include but not be limited to:
- Did students do what they planned to do?
- Did they impact the community need or problem?
- What impact did the service have on the community and the students?
- What academic goals or IEP goals were met through the service?
- What did students learn?

What practitioners can do:
- Think about the best ways to evaluate the success of the program, given your individual student population and community.
- Determine whether your goals for the program were met and what impact service learning has had on student skills and attitudes.
- Help students design and implement evaluation strategies that will help them measure the success of their service learning projects.

What students can do:
- Review the part of their action plan in which they determined what success would "look like" for their service learning project. How can they measure this success?
- Design a survey for stakeholders.
- Reflect on the success and challenges of their overall service experience.

STUDENT WORKSHEETS

Student worksheets are available for Steps 1-5.

CONNECTIONS TO ACADEMIC STANDARDS

The Standards

The "learning" part of service learning means that the service learning process easily and effectively connects to curricular goals already established by the school, district or IEP. Service learning should not be "one more thing" that teachers have to do but, rather, a meaningful, authentic way for students to meet the standards they must already meet. The service learning project can connect to national, state, or district content standards, or to the IEP of a student with disabilities. As with all stages of the service learning process, students should and can play a role in connecting their service learning plan to their curricular goals.

This section gives practitioners concrete examples of how service learning programs can connect to curricular goals, as well as resources for learning more.

It also includes the standards of quality for school-based and community-based service learning developed by the Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform. These standards are not a list of absolutes. They are designed to be broad-reaching, but concrete enough to be translated into action.

Connecting Service Learning to Content Standards

The goals and objectives found in middle school curricula across the nation reflect the need to have students improve in written and oral communication, develop problem solving strategies, conduct research, increase critical and creative thinking skills, understand principles of democracy and economics, and enhance mathematical conceptual and computational knowledge (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development). What better way to do *all* of this than service learning?

According to the Middle School Journal (March 2001), "We work from a belief that children learn best when there are meaningful connections between the content, ideas, and information they are learning. Children are instructed in such a way as to see that the various disciplines and language uses are different ways of knowing. When instruction is integrated, children have opportunities to learn 'through and about' concepts and processes at the same time. Service learning provides another dimension for integrating instruction."

Consider this example:

Community Problem: A local nursing home is understaffed, leaving seniors to feel isolated and in need of attention.

Action Plan: Students will organize activities and do them with seniors each week.

Curricular Connections:

Math: Investigate staff-to-senior ratio in other nursing homes, analyze survey of seniors' interests, and use math skills to determine supply needs.

Social Studies: Research trends and causes of adults in senior centers, learn about generational and cultural differences, learn about the environment inside a nursing home, examine how society views the elderly, and explore the economics behind hiring additional staff.

Language Arts: Conduct interviews of staff and seniors to learn about needs and goals, write and read books to seniors, create a schedule so that all residents receive visits each week, develop communication skills to work with diverse populations.

Science: Learn how science and technology have increased the average lifespan and how this impacts society, learn about nutritional needs of seniors.

The Standards for School-Based and Community-Based Service Learning

I. Effective service learning efforts strengthen service and academic learning.

II. Model service learning provides concrete opportunities for youth to learn new skills, to think critically, and to test new roles in an environment that encourages risk-taking and rewards competence.

III. Preparation and reflection are essential elements in service learning.

IV. Youths' efforts are recognized by those served, including their peers, the school, and the community.

V. Youth are involved in the planning.

VI. The service students perform makes a meaningful contribution to the community.

VII. Effective service learning integrates systematic formative and summative evaluation.

VIII. Service learning connects the school or sponsoring organization and its community in new and positive ways.

IX. Service learning is understood and supported as an integral element in the life of a school or sponsoring organization and its community.

X. Skilled adult guidance and supervision are essential to the success of service learning.

XI. Pre-service training, orientation, and staff development that include the philosophy and methodology of service learning best ensure that program quality and continuity are maintained.