

INTRODUCTION

Educators across the nation are talking about service learning. In fact, many states and school districts now require students to perform a certain number of service hours in order to graduate.

You may be asking yourself what service learning is, how it works, how it's different from community service and whether it's appropriate for the young people with whom you work. This section will answer those questions, and more!

So, let's start from the beginning. Although not everyone uses the same definition for service learning, the core concept is the same: a powerful connection between service to the community and specific academic goals. The concept of service learning stems from the teachings of John Dewey, an educator who believed that we learn best by doing and that learning is most successful when it takes place in a realistic environment.

Although the terms service learning and community service sometimes are used interchangeably, they are not synonymous. Community service, important and meaningful in itself, escalates to service learning when there is a deliberate and explicit connection made between service and learning, which is then accompanied by thoughtful preparation and reflection by the student.

With service learning, students identify a true need in their community, create a plan of action for addressing that need, implement their plan, and reflect – often – on what they've learned. Along the way, they problem-solve, think critically, gain citizenship skills, and work with others -- all in an authentic environment. Their service connects directly with the curricular goals they must master to meet their district or state requirements.

One of the many benefits of service learning is that it is appropriate for virtually all student populations: those that are gifted and those with special needs, those in the early grades and those in the upper grades, those that are "at risk," those that are disenfranchised, and those that are completely average. With service learning, students transform from passive recipients to active providers, from the potential cause of problems to the empowered source of solutions.

According to "Where's the Learning in Service Learning?," a book by researchers Janet Eyler and Dwight Giles, some common characteristics of service learning experiences are:

- Positive and meaningful situations.
- Cooperative rather than competitive experiences, thus promoting skills associated with teamwork, community involvement and citizenship.
- Complex problems in complex settings rather than simplified problems in isolation.
- Opportunities to engage in authentic problem solving.

In genuine service learning, young people are encouraged to take the lead, at a level appropriate to their age and skills. Since teachers and advisers know their populations best, they are well-suited to structure a service learning initiative that meets the levels of their students, the mandates of their districts, and the needs of the communities in which they live.



Thousands of teachers have successfully used service learning to increase student motivation for learning and promote academic goals. It helps students develop a sense of civic responsibility and prepares them for life beyond the classroom in a way no text could teach.

For students, it answers the question, “Why do I have to learn this?” For teachers and advisers, it answers the question, “How can I teach this?” And for many in the community, it answers the question, “Who can help?”

WHAT TYPES OF PROJECTS CAN BE PLANNED?

There literally are hundreds of service learning projects that students can design and implement. These projects are often categorized into the following groups:

Direct service: Students engage in face-to-face interaction with the people being served. Examples are tutoring, mentoring, reading to the blind, and providing companionship to the elderly.

Indirect service: Students address a community need, but are physically distant from the people or organizations they impact. Examples are creating manuals to help a group, raising money for a family in need, or providing toys for sick children.

Advocacy: Students try to increase public awareness of a problem or issue affecting individuals, the community, the nation, or the world as a whole. Examples include speaking, performing, or lobbying for equal rights; getting school funding for the arts; and persuading young people to vote.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF SERVICE LEARNING?

For all students:

- Positive connection to community
- Opportunity to solve authentic problems
- Increased knowledge
- Motivation to complete schoolwork
- Exposure to people different from themselves
- Better test scores
- Less alienation
- Career exploration

Especially for students with special needs:

- A chance to be on the giving rather than the receiving end of service
- A way to make a difference in someone else's life
- An opportunity to partner with the community and with general education students in a positive way
- Authentic practice with social skills and communication
- A sense of belonging
- A way to show that they are capable of doing a job



HOW DOES service Learning connect TO THE SPECIAL NEEDS CLASSROOM?



Children want to feel that they belong, that they can contribute, and that their contributions can matter to the greater good. That desire is no less in children with special needs. In fact, children with disabilities, long on the receiving end of volunteer services, can benefit greatly when given the opportunity to provide service to others. Along the way, they can gain self-esteem, confidence, responsibility, tolerance, and real-world skills.

When recently asked by the Council for Exceptional Children to share their stories of children with special needs *doing* service learning projects, hundreds of special needs educators from across the country responded. The focus of their stories ranged from preschool students to high school students, and from students with mild disabilities to those with severe disabilities. They included students with learning disabilities, hearing and sight impairments, autism, retardation, emotional and behavioral disorders, and many with multiple disabilities and handicaps. While each story was unique, the benefits of service learning were consistent.

Children with disabilities often are segregated from their peers. This not only contributes to feelings of isolation, but also prevents children who do not have special needs from learning about and appreciating their peers as people who have talents and abilities, just like them. Service learning is an ideal way to get students of all ability levels to work together and learn from each other.

Service learning also represents a ripe opportunity for students with disabilities to contribute positively as citizens. Doors are opened to the community that otherwise may have remained shut. In turn, the community benefits from their enthusiasm, experience, and talents. Service learning can introduce students with special needs to job opportunities and serve as a way to show a potential employer that they can do a particular job.

According to a recent article in *CEC Today*, service learning appears to be particularly beneficial for students with exceptionalities. Through such experiences, students have shown improvement in problem solving and conflict resolution as well as academic and social skills.

For children with special needs, as with all students, service learning teaches an important lesson that it truly is better to give than to receive.



WHAT OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES SHOULD EDUCATORS AND ADVISERS CONSIDER?



This website has been designed to assist adults who work with students in grades four through eight. However, service learning is an appropriate teaching and learning strategy for children of all ages and all ability levels. Since all children learn at different levels, educators and service providers are encouraged to adapt all resources and strategies to meet the needs of their individual student populations. Following are some things to consider when implementing a service learning program:

For all students:

- A successful service learning program involves and impacts many people in the school and the community. Gather stakeholders together and talk about their needs and concerns early in the process. Stakeholders may include administrators, group leadership, parents, and community members.
- True service learning meets true community needs; however, you may have transportation limitations due to cost or liability. Will students be able to travel in and around the community, or do you need to limit the service to the school campus?
- Determine if funding or resources are necessary and/or available.
- Review academic goals, and determine how you will decide if and how students meet those goals. Note: Students also can be part of the process of determining which academic goals they'd like to meet.
- Service activities should be of sustained or significant duration. Try to determine how students can maintain a minimum of 40 hours of service over a school year.
- Determine the resources that already exist in your school, district or state. Many districts have service learning coordinators who can offer enormous help.
- Be persistent. Many businesses or organizations are not used to having young people as volunteers. They may not have ready ideas for ways that students can help.
- Let the students be the leaders. Don't carry a load that your students should be carrying; remember that part of the goal is for them to take responsibility. The more responsibility the students take, the better.
- Be flexible. Working with community organizations means being mindful of their schedules and of the changes they experience.

Especially for students with special needs:

- Allow students to design a service learning plan that is appropriate and doable, given their developmental level.
- Consider ways that students with special needs can work directly with other students. Both groups will benefit enormously.
- Start small. A small project can benefit all involved while incurring quick rewards.
- For those with severe disabilities, consider indirect service learning opportunities if that is more appropriate.
- Simulate each stage of the service project to make sure students are truly comfortable.

