

# Service Learning Promotes Positive Youth Development in High School

Both youths and communities benefit when students engage in service learning in and out of school.

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Nurturing young people's civic actions, motivations, and skills can have lasting benefits for both youth and society. This dynamic of mutual individual and societal benefit is a cornerstone of the Positive Youth Development perspective, which emphasizes young people's strengths and the potential for healthy growth (Lerner 2009). As an emerging theory of civic development and broader social contribution, Positive Youth Development asserts that internal assets (such as values and motivations) and the external assets in the lives of youths (such as civic and prosocial experiences in school and other arenas) work in concert to promote confidence, competence, connection, character, and caring — and to encourage young people's contributions to family, community, and civil society. These individual and social variables form the civic context in which youths develop (Zaff, Malanchuk, and Eccles 2008).

Service learning has become an important strategy for encouraging positive youth development and civic contribution by young people. Through service learning, young people experience valued civic participation in their communities and learn to identify community problems, prioritize solutions, and implement problem-solving strategies (Finn and Checkoway 1998). Service learning can help students develop civic motivation, skills, and commitment to continue contributing to civil society and democracy (Flanagan and Sherrod 1998).

For example, high school students who participated in Madison County Youth in Public Service demonstrated significant increases in civic efficacy, civic knowledge, social capital, and commitment to remain involved in the community (Kahne and Westheimer 2006). These students from a rural East Coast community spent a semester learning about government and then worked in small groups with government agen-

**Both required and voluntary school-based service results in increased rates of voting and volunteering in college and adulthood.**

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cies to tackle real community issues. Projects included studying the feasibility of curbside recycling and developing a five-year plan for the fire and res-

## Youths Learning About Youth

What do out-of-school youths offer the workplace? If you ask the public or look at research statistics, it's easy to conclude: not much. Young people who don't complete high school are often disengaged not only from employment and education opportunities, but also their communities.

Eagle Rock School in Estes Park, Colorado, is an alternative high school for students who didn't thrive in mainstream settings. Its curriculum emphasizes experiential education and service learning. When the W.K. Kellogg Foundation decided to sponsor a national initiative called New Options for Youth, which explores various credentials as alternatives to high school diplomas, it did something unusual. Among the researchers the foundation engaged to collect data were service learning students from Eagle Rock.

Michael Soguero, a math teacher and director of professional development at Eagle Rock, said, "We were really thought of as partners in the project." Soguero's math class covered the use of statistics, and a research firm based in Atlanta, Georgia, offered the students training in the ethnographic skills of neutrality and objectivity in interviewing, surveying, and documentation. Through their carefully designed protocols, eight Eagle Rock students conducted surveys and qualitative interviews with more than 75 young men, predominantly black and Latino, from Baltimore, Maryland, and Oakland, California, who hadn't succeeded in traditional school settings.

Because the Eagle Rock students had faced similar hurdles themselves, their base of empathy made the experience powerful. Interview subjects seemed more willing to disclose details about their thoughts and their lives with student-researchers. The project underscored the belief that young people are experts about a substantial number of things that adults are not.

Amanda Hansen, one of the young researchers, talked about what she found empowering about the project: "We were dealing with a real-life situation where we got to develop skills in finding a solution." Students explored aspirations and hurdles by asking their interview subjects such questions as, *What do you want in life? What makes it hard for you to get it?* "I love how I can relate to a lot of these out-of-school youths," said Hansen.

Over a four-month period, the students collected information from multiple perspectives and aggregated and analyzed their data. Students learned to look for patterns among the responses and correlations between the surveys and interviews. "They learned about navigating the real world," said Soguero.

At the end of their project, they flew to Michigan to present their findings to the Kellogg Foundation. Perhaps least surprising, they found that service learning was among the programs that help out-of-school youths take meaningful steps to employment.

Students also left the project feeling that the experience had a profound effect on their ability to make a difference and be involved in the issues affecting their communities.

— Caryn Pernu and Maddy Wegner

cue department. Students who participated expressed strong satisfaction with their accomplishments and the commitment to remain engaged in civic affairs.

Evidence supports the role of service learning experiences in promoting positive youth development and civic contribution, although there are some important qualifications. Several studies have found that both required and voluntary school-based service results in increased rates of voting and volunteering in college and adulthood (Hart et al. 2007; Metz and Youniss 2005; Smith 1999). For example, Dávila and Mora (2007) found that young men were 29% more likely to graduate from college on time if they engaged in service to fulfill a class requirement during high school.

Many factors can affect young people's civic behavior. Parents, peers, and extracurricular activities that don't involve civic participation also appear to complement school-based civic experiences and those that occur outside school, leading to sustained civic participation (Zaff, Malanchuk, and Eccles 2008). The personal characteristics youths bring to civic experiences and the quality of their civic experiences all influence the effects of service learning programs. For these experiences to be successful, youths need to have a voice in identifying the community problem, planning the solution to the problem, and having time to reflect on their experiences (Morgan and Streb 2001).

In *Youth in Public Service*, changes in the student's civic context appear driven by the sense of satisfaction participants expressed about their accomplishments. For example, when youths felt community partners and other adults they worked with didn't take their views seriously, they had more frustrating experiences (Kahne and Westheimer 2006). In addition, if the service activity isn't relevant to them, youths' investment in the activity and any benefits for positive youth development may be diminished (Ginwright and James 2002). Because of this, teachers and other service learning practitioners should be aware that activities appealing to low-income, academically struggling youths in urban areas might be different from activities appealing to academically excelling, private school students living in suburbs.

## VOLUNTARY VS. MANDATORY

Young people's values and motivations also predict participation in service activities (Zaff and Michelsen 2002), and youths disposed to civic participation before civic experiences might gain the most from the experiences (Zaff, Malanchuk, and Eccles 2008). Alternatively, service learning can motivate young people to engage in civic activity. Metz and Youniss (2005) found that high school students

who were more inclined to perform voluntary service were not negatively affected by mandatory service. That is, being required to serve didn't have much effect on those already disposed to volunteer. However, among the group less inclined to service, students required to perform mandatory service showed a greater likelihood of civic interest and understanding, future voting, and conventional civic involvement after their experience.

### **The benefits of service learning programs appear to outweigh the liabilities.**

Nevertheless, mandatory service may not always be beneficial. Among 6th through 8th graders, Covitt (2002) found that girls had more positive attitudes about required service than boys, and that white students had more positive attitudes than black students. Interestingly, student attitudes about mandatory service requirements, but not the requirements themselves, had an effect on their intentions, caring, or sense of responsibility. Students who had more negative attitudes were less likely to feel responsible to serve and showed lowered intentions to serve. It may be, then, that mandatory community service would not have the long-term effects of increasing volunteerism that proponents expect, at least for youths who perceive themselves as least likely to volunteer freely.

Evidence shows that across the high school years, service learning experiences tend to help young people become more informed and engaged citizens, which supports the aspirations of families, educators, and policy makers. Service learning is linked to positive youth development and to the growth of positive civic characteristics and behaviors. The benefits of service learning programs appear to outweigh the liabilities.

Given the variation in the influences of these programs, more nuanced practice is needed, and the recent K-12 Service Learning Standards for Quality Practice should provide some guidance. Teachers and other practitioners should give young people opportunities to develop and implement service learning projects and should provide the time and direction to reflect on the learning and the service that students accomplish through their work. This process can have the added benefit of ensuring that youths are pursuing initiatives that interest and engage them. Furthermore, given that parents and the broader community are parts of the civic context and can complement young people's service learning experiences, educators interested in service learning can do more to encourage parents to talk with their

children about the projects and to connect the projects to activities outside of school. **K**

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