

# Germany

## SERVICE LEARNING IN ITS INFANCY

The variety of schools embracing service learning and the array of projects they're undertaking suggests a strong future for the teaching method.

### By Anna Maria Baltes and Anne Seifert

Service learning is still at the pioneer stage in Germany. Out of the 40,000 schools in Germany, only a few hundred have tried the teaching method. This school year, about 50 schools are participating in the German service learning network.

The German Service Learning network — or *Netzwerk Lernen durch Engagement* (“learning through civic engagement”) — connects practitioners and supporters nationwide.

The network has established four main indicators of high-quality service learning:

- Service learning addresses real community issues — and students should have a voice about the issues they want to address.
- Service learning is integrated into the curriculum.
- Reflection is a part of service learning.
- A school-community partnership allows students to enter the “real world.”

Experience has shown that outside support makes it easier for schools to

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maintain high-quality standards. Therefore, the network provides support to local schools wherever feasible. As part of the network, volunteer agencies and private foundations offer counseling at six regional service learning centers. In some federal states and counties, service learning has become part of official teacher education and training programs or is sponsored by the ministry of education.

The network is coordinated and administered by the Freudenberg Foundation in Weinheim. Coordinators work intensively with schools to explore how service learning can work in the German school system, and they advance research and develop materials that are shared online at [www.service-learning.de](http://www.service-learning.de). They also advocate for service learning and find new partners and schools to establish regional networks. On the national level, the network represents the idea of service learning in debates concerning the advancement of civic engagement among youth.

#### SERVICE LEARNING TAKES MANY FORMS

The schools in the network represent all types of German schools, from grades 1 to 12. Recently, a number of

vocational schools joined the network. At one vocational school in Halle, students visited a retirement home and interviewed the senior citizens to find out what kind of wellness-related services would be welcome and needed. Many residents asked for manicures or head massages. Students prepared the inter-

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views in class and worked out a schedule for four afternoons in the institution. As part of the school's vocational training, students learned about cosmetics, treatments, and customer service. In science class, students studied biological and biochemical aging processes.

The schools in the network use various types of service learning. While some teachers limit their use of service learning to projects in one or more subjects for a limited time during the school year, other teachers offer elective classes that are taught exclusively using service learning. Some schools have established

that certain subjects be taught as a service learning class, for example, work orientation or ethics. Some teachers feel that they can teach children best about ethical behavior by engaging them in

**A secondary school in Bamberg, Bavaria, engages students of different age groups and subjects in a shared project protecting the architectural heritage of the medieval city center.**

*Bamberg's Altes Rathaus or old Town Hall (right) was built in the 14th century.*



community service and discussing real-life experiences arising from the service.

Because of federal state requirements, many schools are familiar with community service in the form of individual social service or internships. As a result, most service learning projects involve direct service to people in need, mostly children (peer-teaching projects are very popular), the elderly, or people with disabilities. Some high-quality projects outside social services exist as well. One vocational school project has focused on traffic safety. Students learned how to create portraits and caricatures in art class and designed pictures of playing children. These were transferred onto weatherproof wooden surfaces and, in cooperation with the local community, displayed at dangerous street corners to discourage speeding.

At some schools, service learning connects different subjects. A secondary school in Bamberg, Bavaria, engages students of different age groups and subjects in a shared project protecting the architectural heritage of the medieval city center. A music class pre-

pared a concert with Renaissance pieces to commemorate the 800th birthday of Saint Elizabeth and to raise funds for the restoration of the organ inside the St. Elizabeth church. A German lan-

guage class interviewed residents in the historic quarter and made a book of the interviews. Currently, an economics class is working out a marketing plan for the book, so that it, too, can be sold to raise funds for the organ.

#### **FEDERAL STATE POLICIES**

In Germany, the federal states are responsible for education policy. In the federal states of Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria, schools are required to offer project-oriented courses for students in grades 11 and 12. In these classes, students learn to work on a given topic in depth, practice their research skills, prepare for college, and collaborate with partners outside the community. Although the examples given by the federal states suggest scientific research projects or internships with local firms, a service learning project does meet all the requirements and enables the students to make a positive impact.

One example was the course “Integrative Freiburg.” Students studied different aspects of integration and researched ex-

isting efforts regarding people with disabilities, refugees, and ex-convicts in their hometown of Freiburg. Each student then chose an integration project in which he or she wanted to help. The state requirement is that the class be taught in three lessons a week. In Freiburg, two lessons were taught in school, and the third was used for the service.

Other federal states require all students to spend time (usually one or two weeks) as interns in social institutions, such as nursery schools, homeless shelters, or senior citizen clubs. Some schools have recognized that students benefit more from these experiences when they not only visit as interns, but actually plan and carry out projects.

Traditionally, in Germany, there was no school in the afternoons. Lessons were limited to the morning hours, and students went home for lunch. Recently, though, many German schools have been turned into all-day schools, including a lunch break and lesson time in the afternoons. This transformation holds great potential for turning existing community service requirements into service learning because the additional time for lessons in the afternoon can be used for preparation, reflection, and evaluation.

German schools have undergone many curricular changes in the last years. One great advantage for service learning is that schools now focus more on such student outcomes as knowledge, competencies, and skills and less on the required teacher input.

Service learning is not yet widespread in Germany, but besides very encouraging attempts from schools so far, there is a political factor in its favor: The question of how more people can be won over to civic engagement is currently widely discussed. One of the strategic goals for service learning in Germany now is to persuade decision makers that, with service learning, schools can promote learning *and* play, a crucial factor in engaging youth in their communities. The variety of schools that are already engaging in many types of service learning projects shows a strong future for the teaching method. **K**

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