

ISSUE BRIEF

The Impact of Service-Learning: A Review of Current Research



Research studies of service-learning, an educational method that intentionally connects community service to classroom learning, demonstrate that service-learning programs can have positive impacts on youth in three general areas: academic engagement and achievement; civic attitudes and behaviors; and social and personal skills. The studies also demonstrate that students gain the maximum benefit when their service-learning experience includes a direct tie to the curriculum, planning and design of service projects by students, structured reflection on the service experience in the classroom, and continuity of service for at least one semester. This issue brief offers some of the most compelling evidence to date on how service-learning positively affects youth.

(NOTE: For a complete bibliography of works cited in this brief, go to www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/slresearchreview.pdf.)

Improved Academic Achievement

- The National Research Council's summary of research on high school engagement found that active participation by students is important for effective learning, and they identify service-learning as one of the most effective strategies for improving student engagement and, thereby, academic learning (Bransford, et al., 1999).
- A California comparison study found that high school students who participated in service-learning programs scored higher on all of the study's academic measures than did those high school students who did not participate in service-learning. These academic measures included mastery of course content, problem-solving skills, and attitudes toward learning (Furco 2002).
- Three separate studies--in Philadelphia, Denver, and Hawaii--found that service-learning students developed better problem-solving skills and understanding of cognitive complexities. According to the studies, service-learning students were better able to advance realistic solutions to problems, understand the systemic

nature of a community problem, and take steps to address a problem (Billig 2002; Meyer 2003; Billig and Meyer 2002).

- A large-scale Michigan study found service-learning to be positively correlated with test scores on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) for 5th grade students, particularly in writing and social studies (Klute and Billig 2002).
- A Philadelphia "Need in Deed" study found that 6th grade students who participated in service-learning programs had higher scores than non-participants in standardized tests for language arts and science (Billig 2004).

Improved Academic Engagement

- A large-scale study of Michigan Learn and Serve program sites found that service-learning participants from grades 7 to 12 were more cognitively engaged in English language studies than students who had not participated in service-learning (Klute and Billig 2002).

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- A national study of high school students found that when youth reported greater engagement in service-learning, they were more likely to be academically engaged and become attached to school and community (Billig, et al. 2005).
- A study of urban high school youth engaged in service-learning activities demonstrated positive and significant gains in school attendance and acceptable school behaviors (Luchs 1980).
- Students who participated in high quality service-learning programs showed a greater increase in measures of school engagement and achievement in mathematics than did control groups (Melchior 1999).
- Several studies showed that students who engaged in service-learning had higher attendance rates than control group peers (Shaffer 1993; Supik 1996; Shumer 1994).

Positive Civic Attitudes and Behaviors

- A study of Colorado's Learn and Serve programs showed a significant and positive connection between participation in service-learning and students' connection to their community and their school (Kim and Billig 2003).
- According to an evaluation of Philadelphia Freedom Schools, high school students who participate in service-learning had increases in their connections to the community, acquisition of leadership skills, and the ability to make changes in the community (Billig 2002).
- A survey of students from 10 different high schools found that youth who are given a voice through service-learning activities improve their self-concept, political engagement, and tolerance of others (Morgan and Streb 2001).
- High school students who participated in service-learning and service are more likely to be engaged in a community organization and to vote 15 years after their participation in the program than those who did not participate (Youniss, et al. 1997).

Enhanced Social and Personal Skills

- A 2002 California comparison study found significant and positive relationship between participation in service-learning and ethics among high school students (Furco 2002).

- An evaluation of service-learning programs in California found that 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, et al. 1998).
- A study of service-learning programs in Florida found that students who engaged in service-learning were less likely to be referred to the office for disciplinary measures (Follman 1998).
- Participation in service-learning has been shown to be correlated to the reduction of behaviors that lead to pregnancy or arrest. (Kirby 2001; Melchior 1999; Allen, et al. 1994).

LEARN AND SERVE AMERICA

Over the last several decades, service-learning has grown tremendously throughout the United States at all education levels, in part because of the efforts of Learn and Serve America, the federal program that since 1992 has provided grants to schools, colleges, and community groups to support this educational method. Learn and Serve America, which is administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service, provides an "on ramp" to a lifetime of civic engagement for more than 1.4 million students each year. In addition to awarding grants, Learn and Serve America provides free resources on service-learning to the public, teachers, faculty members, schools, youth, and youth service groups through the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse. For more information, go to www.learnandserve.gov.

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