

Advancing Equity Through Service Learning

Building on Strengths Students Have Gained After a Year of Turmoil

Jean Grossman and Nancy Duchesneau

In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic struck the United States. Every part of America has been affected while its existing inequities have been both highlighted and worsened. Millions of families lost income as parents, especially those of color and those employed in low-paying industries, lost their jobs. By May 2020, one in three children lived in a household that either was experiencing food insecurity or was not caught up on rent.¹ In late May, the death of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer sparked a multiracial movement of protests and a social mobilization of Americans young and old across the country. All of these events happened against a backdrop of a highly polarized political environment that even turned violent in late 2020 and January 2021. This was a year of turmoil for America, exacerbating food insecurity, homelessness, and physical and mental health issues.² Students around the country, but especially children of color and children living in low-income households, were affected as their lives were upended at critical developmental stages.³ However, with these challenges and their new realities came chances to develop new strengths.

Without minimizing the damage this pandemic has inflicted on many families, this brief reminds educational leaders that many students have also grown tremendously from the events they have experienced. As schools prepare to welcome some or all students back to in-person learning, educators are focused on helping young people rebound as fast as possible. Educational leaders now have the opportunity and the federal resources (from the American Rescue Plan) to make schools more healing and empowering spaces, and to commit to supporting their students socially, emotionally, and academically. In addition to addressing the harms of the past year through interventions, educators can use this opportunity to improve educational systems, shifting deficit-based structures and practices to strength-based approaches. Research has shown that academic success is entwined with social and emotional learning and well-being,⁴ and that students are far more likely to engage fully in activities when they call on and develop their strengths, rather than focus on their deficits.⁵

Service learning is one such strength-based strategy that warrants serious attention from today's educators. Educator Heather Wolpert-Gawron defines it simply as one where "students learn educational standards through tackling real-life problems in their communities,"⁶ of which there are now more,

and of which students are now likely to be more aware. Service-learning projects address real community problems using the skills students have and those they are taught, while also intentionally deepening students' academic, social, and emotional skills. The engagement with their communities also enhances their civic awareness.⁷ Thus, service learning is an opportunity to foster the strengths and assets students have built over the past year, and, as presented in this brief, it provides proven social, emotional, and academic benefits to students. Yet service learning has not been given much attention in the current discussion of the postlockdown school environment.

This brief discusses how schools can put in place service learning to build on the skills and heightened community awareness students have developed through the difficulties of the past year. The next section describes the types of life skills students developed over this turbulent year. The following section describes what service learning is, how it builds on students' strengths, and how it can enhance equity. The next two sections present evidence about service learning's prevalence and effects, followed by the main implementation challenges and facilitating factors. The brief ends with a brief conclusion arguing that some of districts' COVID-19 recovery money should be earmarked now to build the infrastructure to provide this equity-promoting, evidence-based educational strategy.

Building on Students' Strengths

Early data show the pandemic had a disproportionate effect on the health, education, employment, and wellness of families of color, families from low-income backgrounds, and families that have otherwise been historically marginalized and underserved.⁸ Educators fear that these effects will result in substantially worse academic outcomes for students from these families compared with students with more advantages, if active steps are not taken.⁹ However, worsening inequity is not a foregone outcome, especially if schools focus on students' strengths.

Students, especially those who have been hardest hit over the past year, have been more resilient than ever, taking on new responsibilities to support their families and communities through the stress of economic, health, and political uncertainties. Many have also deepened their civic skills and agency by participating in the election or in the national mobilization related to social justice that followed George Floyd's murder.¹⁰ Academically, students have adapted their learning techniques for a virtual environment in which they had more control over how they studied and engaged in topics that interested them. The new tasks these students have taken on over the past year—from caregiving to teaching siblings to activism in their communities—have shown the strength and resilience of their generation. Yes, the events students have experienced over these past 18 months have affected them in many negative ways, but many have sharpened important life skills; gained a new understanding of their roles in their families, communities, and nation; and strengthened their ability to direct their own learning. Educators can build on these strengths. Indeed, Ann Masten, a leading resilience researcher, notes that the best resilience interventions build on students' strengths, as “competence promotes competence.”¹¹

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A Strategy to Consider: Civic Engagement Through Service Learning

School districts have given tremendous thought to how to help students. In particular, districts are contemplating tutoring and extended learning time, as well as strengthening relationships between teachers and students, being more “healing-centered,” and having more mental health staff members in schools.¹² To aid in the educational recovery, the federal government has given schools money to make their plans a reality. These are all important steps to fill the deficits created by the events of 2020, but it will be important to remember that these events have also led children to build skills and strengths on which schools can capitalize.

One such strength-based strategy is service learning. Service learning is a type of civic engagement or community service where students help address real-world problems (often in their local communities), but with explicit learning goals embedded in the service projects. While all forms of civic engagement can be meaningful for students, schools can create the biggest benefits for students if they provide opportunities that connect service to the academic subjects students are learning in schools. This strategy marries community service with students' academic learning, honing social and emotional competencies, and building a sense of efficacy and mattering. When students are deeply engaged in tasks they see as important, they are motivated to learn the needed academic material, and they gain social and emotional competencies that promote learning. Service learning is a very flexible activity that can be used with students of all ages. Examples are in Box 1.

Youth-development research indicates that young people, especially those who are the least engaged in school, tend to engage more actively in strength-based activities than in deficit-oriented activities.¹³ Individual learning opportunities are definitely needed after the 2020-2021 school year, but while many academic interventions focus on a student's deficits, service learning can add a much-needed focus on the student as a community asset, strengthening competencies of which the student is proud. School service learning allows students to be active participants in rebuilding their communities, while motivating them to learn academic material.

The Benefits

Many schools already encourage their students to participate in community service activities. In 2008, a survey done by the Corporation for National and Community Service found that 68 percent of all American schools—60 percent of elementary schools, 74 percent of middle schools, and

BOX 1 Examples of Service-Learning Projects

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	MIDDLE SCHOOL	HIGH SCHOOL
Fifth-graders tutored younger students in reading over the course of a school year.	A middle school science class studying pollution and disease worked with the Environmental Protection Agency to learn about the dangers of radon and how to test for it in homes. To educate the community on hazards, testing, and cleanup, students created an infomercial to share with local schools and community groups.	When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, high school students took their community concerns online, providing resources for those struggling with mental health issues, virtual story hours for younger students, and opportunities to celebrate senior year with a standardized Instagram format about next-step plans.

SOURCE: National Youth Leadership Council, “What Is Service Learning?” (website: www.nylc.org/page/WhatisService-Learning, accessed on May 11, 2021).

86 percent of high schools—had school-recognized community service activities. Approximately 85 percent of these were activities arranged by the school. However, service learning—which connects the service activity with classroom instruction—was less common, with 24 percent of schools offering it (20 percent of elementary schools, 25 percent of middle schools, and 35 percent of high schools).¹⁴

There is good evidence that more schools should consider it. A meta-analysis of service learning found that service learning improved students’ academic outcomes, social skills, attitudes toward school and learning, and attitudes toward themselves and their civic engagement, with the impact on academic outcomes being the largest.¹⁵ An earlier meta-analysis that included both service learning and community service activities found that having a curriculum associated with the civic activity doubled the activity’s impact on students.¹⁶ Another review found that civic activities also give students the opportunity to learn and hone many important twenty-first-century skills—such

as communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking—that can help students in their future careers.¹⁷

Service-learning activities can be especially helpful in engaging students who have traditionally seen school as not very relevant to their lives. Michael Nakkula and colleagues have spent decades investigating what conditions help students, especially students with lower achievement, engage in learning and succeed. A 2013 article summarizes some of the findings.¹⁸ In it, Nakkula notes reengaged students often are first motivated by the opportunity to work on an area in which they are interested, such as homelessness, social justice, or immigration. Their involvement in issues then inspires them to contribute in these areas and to realize that they can use the skills being taught in school to make a greater impact, building on competencies they have already developed. Other researchers, too, have also found that service learning can improve attendance and academic achievement for students from low-income schools.¹⁹ Thus, there is suggestive evidence that service learning could be a useful tool for advancing educational equity.

Unfortunately, there is a disparity in opportunities for school-based service learning and community service, one that echoes the achievement gap between students from higher- and lower-income schools. The Corporation for National and Community Service survey cited earlier found that while 62 percent of schools in low-income areas have school-recognized community service and 20 percent offer service learning, 72 percent of schools in non-low-income areas have community service activities and 27 percent offer service learning.²⁰ This disparity means students in low-income areas have fewer opportunities to hone critical twenty-first-century skills, and to sharpen their academic skills by applying them to real-world problems. Engaging in service learning also sends a message to students that they can and should be empowered to identify and fix problems in society. Equity demands that all students—those from schools with more and fewer resources—be given the agency to address society’s problems, many of which disproportionately affect people in low-income communities.

Components of High-Quality Implementation

High-quality service learning requires community partnerships, planning, monitoring, and thoughtful professional development. Indeed, one of the meta-analyses mentioned above found that more effective service-learning activities incorporate one or more of the National Youth Leadership Council’s 2008 evidence-based standards for quality service-learning activities.²¹ The eight standards are:

- The service is meaningful to the students and the community.
- It is linked to learning goals.
- Students have a voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating the activity.

- Students formally reflect on themselves and their relationship with society.
- It promotes an understanding of diversity and mutual respect.
- Schools partner with the community in a collaborative, mutually beneficial manner.
- Implementation quality is monitored to ensure students are doing meaningful tasks.
- The activity is long enough to address community needs meaningfully.

Funding

Implementing high-quality service learning takes time and resources. If a preponderance of schools are to offer it to students, therefore, it would be useful for the federal government, state departments of education, and district policymakers to provide support for schools and teachers. For example, before 2011, the federal government had a dedicated funding source to support service learning in preschool through twelfth grade: Learn and Service America. That funding source helped the movement spread from 27 states in 2000 to 42 states in 2011.²² Although Learn and Service America was defunded in 2011, AmeriCorps and the U.S. Department of Education could provide joint guidance on ways COVID-19 relief funding can be used for service learning.

An important step states can take is to adopt standards for schools on developing twenty-first-century skills through the hands-on application of knowledge to real-world issues.²³ The laser focus on standardized test scores that occurred during the first part of the 2000s under No Child Left Behind led some schools to deemphasize the critical thinking, communication, and teamwork that employers and society value. Service-learning projects can fill this void. Besides setting standards that promote service learning, states can provide funding for it, offer guidance on how to operate successful service-learning projects, and provide technical assistance, for example by identifying or developing strong curricula, training opportunities, and online resources.

Staff Professional Development

A recent review of implementation research on project-based learning (of which service learning can be considered a type) strongly suggests that professional development for the teachers and instructors who lead the activities is critical.²⁴ Both teachers and students need to shift from the traditional, teacher-centered model of instruction to a student-centered one. Effective service-learning teachers are more like coaches than instructors. Teachers promote learning by breaking down tasks into doable assignments at first, but then over time, as students' understanding grows, gauge when to remove various types of assistance. The review finds that effective professional development includes both initial training and ongoing support. Besides professional development, tools that have been found to help teachers facilitate effective service learning include curricular materials, video demonstrations, listservs, and examples of assessments to grade students' service-learning performance.²⁵ States and districts can help provide these tools.

District Support

At the local level, districts can assist schools by identifying, vetting, and developing memorandums of understanding with strong community partners (such as environmental groups) or volunteers, who can help operate a variety of service-learning clubs and opportunities in schools. Although the payoff can be considerable, it is not easy for a school to develop a productive working relationship with a community partner, design projects that allow students to learn or apply academic skills while meeting community goals, and manage these projects.²⁶ Districts can provide in-person training and support to help school staff members both to manage their partner organizations and to implement service-learning curricula well. Districts can also help raise funds for these activities.²⁷

The Corporation for National and Community Service survey mentioned above showed that schools are much more likely to adopt service learning if there is district support. Where districts had formal policies encouraging the use of service learning with certain subjects (such as social studies or science), half the principals reported using service learning; where districts had no explicit policy, only 17 percent of the principals reported using it. When principals reported that their districts provided technical assistance for service learning, 60 percent had service-learning projects; among those without assistance, only 15 percent had such projects.²⁸

Conclusion

The events of 2020 have denied young people critical developmental opportunities. Many people have focused on these losses students have experienced and the deficits that need filling. However, 2020 has also strengthened young people in other ways. Many children, especially children of essential workers (many of whom are people of color employed in low-wage industries), have taken on more family responsibilities.²⁹ Many children have become more independent learners; others have become civically engaged through volunteering, joining political or social justice movements in person or online. As students come back to the classroom, schools do need to address the impact of the pandemic, but they also should not overemphasize deficits. Service-learning activities can be used to reenforce for students of all ages that they have skills they can use to improve their communities or society.

Service learning is not a quick-fix solution for districts, however. To develop high-quality service-learning projects, districts and schools need to build their ability to work with local organizations, and to provide professional development and ongoing support to teachers. However, service learning is an investment that can return a trifecta of benefits, affecting academic outcomes, social-emotional and twenty-first-century skills, and equity. While service learning may not be offered widely this coming school year, districts can consider earmarking some of their recovery funds to start building now the infrastructure needed to provide these opportunities for their students in the weeks and months to come.³⁰

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