

Connecting With Your Local Community Through Service Learning



*In a democratic society we must live cooperatively,
and serve the community in which we live, to the best of our ability.
For our own success to be real, it must contribute to the success of others.*

- Eleanor Roosevelt

In order for democratic societies to prosper, its citizens need to be educated and committed toward working for the common good. A responsible citizenry is created by the deliberate efforts of individuals to infuse the ideals of cooperation, compassion, and respect among all members of a society. A commitment to service is not necessarily an inherent disposition. It is usually a quality that is modeled and nurtured over long periods of time.

Service-learning provides the mechanism for young people to see the value of service to their community while developing tangible connections to classroom learning. Unlike community service, which is often unrelated to academic content, service-learning is seen as an instructional strategy that inspires young people to learn about and serve their communities through experiences directly tied to their school curriculum.

Service-learning was clearly defined in the National and Community Service Act of 1990, signed into law by President George Bush. The act, reauthorized in 1993 as the National and Community Service Trust Act, was signed by President Bill Clinton.

The term service-learning is defined as a method-

- A. *Under which students or participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that—*
- 1. is conducted in and meets the needs of a community;*
 - 2. is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community service program, and with the community; and*
 - 3. helps foster civic responsibility; and*
- B. *that—*
- 1. is integrated into and enhances the [core] academic curriculum of the students, or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled; and*
 - 2. provides structured time for the students or participants to reflect on the service experience.*

Schools across America have adopted service-learning as a proven mechanism for increasing academic achievement, meeting academic content standards, and increasing a sense of civic responsibility among young people. Most agree that in order for this goal to be achieved, multiple service-learning experiences must occur at each grade span and each grade level.

The California Superintendent's Service-Learning Task Force has identified the following recommendations toward achieving the goals of high quality service learning:

- Develop policies and plans to ensure that all students have academically meaningful, sequential, and sustained service-learning experiences throughout their schooling.*
- Link service-learning to state and local standards, assessments, and accountability tools.*
- Work collaboratively with community partners and national service providers, such as AmeriCorps and VISTA, to ensure that roles and responsibilities are clear, service is meaningful, and all partners are committed to success.*
- Give youth a voice in their education by involving them fully in planning, implementing, and evaluating service-learning activities.*
- Establish a local service-learning advisory committee or include service-learning representatives on existing school and district advisory committees.*
- Provide ongoing training and professional development for teachers, administrators, community partners, students, and family members so that everyone understands service-learning.*



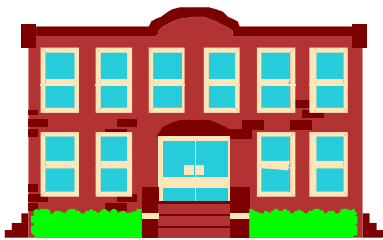
- *Provide adequate funding, resources, and time to infuse service-learning fully in schools and communities.*
- *Include service-learning as a vital instructional strategy in teacher education programs.*

Deeply imbedded within the History/Social Science discipline are the ideals of citizenship, democracy, and civic value. Service-learning clearly speaks to these ideals through hands-on experiences that provide students the opportunity to reflect upon their contributions as responsible citizens in a democratic society. In addition, there are many specific themes and learning objectives, identified in the History/Social Science Academic Content Standards that can also be achieved through service-learning experiences. Below are a few examples:

- ***Community Themes***

Students learn about the needs of various groups in their community, volunteer at local facilities and/or collect items needed by facility to serve the needs of individuals.

Community groups in need of services may include:



- homeless
- senior citizens
- abused children and adults
- disabled
- under-achieving students
- second language learners
- animals (pet adoptions)

- ***Local History Themes***

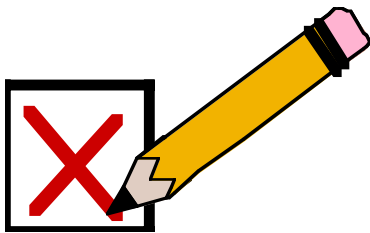
Many local communities lack the resources to accurately collect, record, and document the local history of their area. Students can assist in this process by:



- interviewing senior citizens and local historians
- volunteering at local museums and historical societies to update and maintain local histories
- developing and publishing local history writings

- ***Civic Education and Civic Responsibility***

The study of civics and government are critically important to the development of an informed, responsible citizenry and the future of democratic societies. Engaging students in service-learning opportunities that utilize and support these learnings increase civic understanding and a commitment among young people to support and improve the political process in the years to come. Service-learning activities linked to civic education may include:



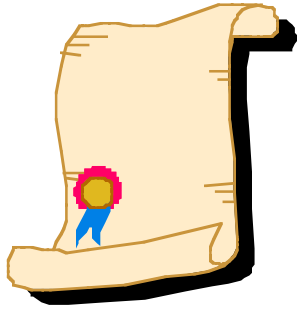
- Volunteering in a political campaign
- Staging a public forum that enables community members to hear opposing views and issues of political candidates and initiatives
- Helping with voter registration
- Organizing a campaign to “get the vote out” particularly among young voters (18 – 25 year olds) who represent the age group with the lowest voter turnout
- Working in polling booths
- Developing public policies to address current problems or community needs (see below)
- Volunteer at political conventions or forums
- Teach younger students or peers about the political process
- Support or establish a student council at a school
- Represent youth on local governing boards (Board of Education, City Council, etc.)

- ***Enacting Public Policy***

Most social issues and problems that occur in modern society are generally not unique to the 20th and 21st century. For example, acts of vandalism as *willful acts of destruction* have occurred repeatedly throughout history as evidenced by the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the destructive acts of the Vandals throughout Europe during the fall of the Roman Empire, and even the protests of American colonists during the “Boston Tea Party.”

By making historical comparisons to recurring issues and themes in history, students can analyze the failures and successes of the past and use these learnings to address the many social problems of the present. These insights enable students to develop, promote, or enact

public policies based on the learnings of the past. The process for developing public policies for the purpose of addressing needs in the local community may include:



- Identifying a current public problem or issue of concern
- Making historical connections to the past
- Examining policies and plans from the past for the purpose of addressing the identified problem in the present
- Identifying and examining alternative policies, programs, and plans which address the identified problem or need
- Developing a feasible public policy that addresses the current problem or issue
- Presenting the plan to the appropriate governing body for adoption