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NEARLY a decade ago, Dan Conrad and Diane Hedin wrote a synthesis of the **research** in **service-learning**. They cited a growing trend toward the adoption of **service-learning** in **K-12** schools because of two perceived needs: the reform of youth and the reform of education.

At that time, young people seemed to be growing increasingly alienated from their communities and from society as a whole. They were less likely than other age groups to vote or to volunteer, and their top goal was to be well off financially. Test scores were said to be declining in schools, and the U.S. education system was said to be less competitive internationally. **Service-learning** offered a powerful pedagogical alternative that allowed students to gain a greater understanding of concepts while they contributed to their communities.

Service-learning, though, was still an "unproven" educational approach. Reviewing the **research on** the impact of **service-learning**, Conrad and Hedin concluded that "the case for community **service** as a legitimate educational practice receives provisional support from quantitative, quasi-experimental studies and even more consistent affirmation from the reports and testimony of participants and practitioners."(FN1)

Advocacy for **service-learning** has grown in the past decade, but many of the issues raised by Conrad and Hedin remain current. As **service-learning** has become more popular, both its advocates and its detractors have begun to ask difficult and serious questions. Just what is **service-learning**? Is it a model, a program, a pedagogy, or a philosophy? What key elements need to be in place for a program to claim to be **service-learning**? What does "best practice" look like? What are the effects and impacts of **service-learning**? Do the characteristics (for example, grade level, age, socioeconomic status) of the participants matter? Do the characteristics of and relationships with the **service** recipients influence outcomes? Do school characteristics matter? Does the sponsorship or the **service** target make a difference? Ten years of **research** and practice can shed some light **on** many of these questions.

PREVALENCE OF SERVICE-LEARNING

In the past decade, **service-learning** has grown by leaps and bounds. From 1984 through 1997, the number of **K-12** students involved in **service** programs rose from 900,000 to 12,605,740, and the percentage of high school students participating in **service-learning** nationwide increased from 2% to 25%. In 1984, 27% of all high schools in the U.S. offered some type of **service** program, and 9% offered **service-learning**.(FN2) According to a report issued by the National Center for Educational Statistics in 1999, 64% of all public schools and 83% of public high schools now organize some form of community **service** for their students.(FN3) Nearly a third of all schools and half of public high schools provide **service-learning** programs. This nationally representative survey also found that elementary schools are more likely to have school-wide or gradewide **service-learning** programs, while middle and high schools are more likely to have individual classes or electives in **service-learning**. The most common reasons cited for the adoption of **service-learning** included helping students to become more active members of the community, increasing student knowledge and understanding of the community, meeting real community needs, and encouraging students' altruism and caring for others.

Service-learning programs exist in every state in the Union. Many states, such as California and Maryland, have established **service-learning** goals for all students, and several cities, such as Chicago and Philadelphia, either strongly encourage or actually mandate **service-learning** for their students. In some states, such as South Carolina, Delaware, Kentucky, and Vermont, **service-learning** is strongly promoted as a strategy for education reform.

PUBLIC SUPPORT

While **service-learning** is not widely known or understood by the public, it is supported where it is known. A media scan conducted recently by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation showed that more than half of the articles written about **service-learning** in the popular media were favorable.(FN4) Those that addressed **K-12 service-learning** typically focused **on** civic education and positive youth development. Focus groups conducted by the same

research group showed that parents and teachers in particular liked the potential for **service-learning** to impart practical experience, improve academic performance, create better citizens, and aid in personal development. Many respondents, though, were somewhat concerned about whether **service-learning** would distract schools from the "basics" or subordinate the role of parents in teaching values. They also expressed concern about student safety and mandatory **service**, calling the latter "involuntary servitude."

DEFINITIONS OF SERVICE-LEARNING

As many articles and at least two books explain, **service-learning** has been a popular educational philosophy for a very long time.(FN5) Most trace its roots to the writings of John Dewey and Jean Piaget, and some even go back as far as Alexis de Tocqueville. These philosophers believed that **learning** occurs best when students are actively involved in their own **learning** and when the **learning** has a distinct purpose.

Service-learning, though, is variously defined, and discussion of its definition is often the source of disagreement among proponents. The National Society for Experiential Education, for example, defines **service-learning** as "any carefully monitored **service** experience in which a student has intentional **learning** goals and reflects actively **on** what he or she is **learning** throughout the experience."(FN6) The Corporation for National **Service** has a narrower definition.

The term "**service-learning**" means a method under which students or participants **learn** and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized **service** that:

- * is conducted in and meets the needs of a community;
- * is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community-**service** program and with the community;
- * helps foster civic responsibility;
- * 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
- * provides structured time for the students or participants to reflect **on** the **service** experience.(FN7)

While disagreement about the definition of **service-learning** persists, there is general consensus that its major components include "active participation, thoughtfully organized experiences, focus **on** community needs and school/community coordination, academic curriculum integration, structured time for reflection, opportunities for application of skills and knowledge, extended **learning** opportunities, and development of a sense of caring for others."(FN8) The disagreements arise when people try to distinguish **service-learning** from other experiential education approaches, such as volunteer and community **service**, internships, field studies, and cross-age peer tutoring. Robert Sigmon and James Toole and Pamela Toole, for example, believe that precision in defining terms is critical if the field is to establish clear goals and standards for high-quality practice.(FN9) These researchers suggest a typology that distinguishes **service-learning** from its closely related program types by defining the former as a program in which the **service** and **learning** goals are of equal weight, each enhancing the other for all participants. Andrew Furco elaborates by pointing out that **service-learning** is intentionally designed "to equally benefit the provider and the recipient of the **service** as well as to ensure equal focus **on** both the **service** being provided and the **learning** that is occurring."(FN10)

Differences in definition reflect a division of opinion in the field regarding whether **service-learning** is a philosophy of education, a curricular tool, or a program design. Those who believe that it is a philosophy often discuss it in terms of education reform. **Service-learning** is viewed either as a way to reinvigorate the central role that schools can play in developing responsible, caring citizens who deeply understand democracy and the meaning of civic responsibility(FN11) or as a way to operationalize constructivist theories of **learning**.(FN12) Those who view it as a curricular tool see its potential as a powerful, active form of reciprocal teaching and **learning** and discuss the need for **service-learning** to be fully integrated into the curriculum and aligned with standards.(FN13) Those who view **service-learning** as a program are more likely to operationalize it as an elective for high school students, an after-school program, or a short-term activity that emphasizes promoting caring and making connections to the community through the provision of a **service**.

STANDARDS FOR QUALITY

While there are strong disagreements about the definition of **service-learning**, there is relative consensus **on** standards for quality. Most of the writing **on service-learning** refers to the standards for quality established by the Alliance for **Service-Learning** in Educational Reform (ASLER standards) or the Essential Elements of **Service-Learning**, a version of these standards updated by 13 **service-learning** organizations.(FN14) (See the sidebar "Essential Elements," page 663.)

California and Maryland have also established standards for **service-learning**, and other states are expected to

follow suit. Standards for **service-learning** address both content and performance and are typically stated in terms of what students will know and be able to do as a result of their participation. For example, California specifies that students will understand how community needs are identified, the relationships between schools and communities, and the significance of their **service** experience. They will demonstrate curricular knowledge and skills and civic responsibility.(FN15)

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

Research in the field of **service-learning** has not caught up with the passion that educators feel for it. What **research** is available, though, is beginning to build a case for the impacts that practitioners believe to be true. The summary of **research** findings below presents the past decade of **research on service-learning** in **K-12** schools. For purposes of this review, **service-learning** is defined as "a teaching strategy that explicitly links community-**service** experiences to classroom instruction." The power of the summary derives from the fact that there is a body of evidence that is building to support the field.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Readers should be aware of the limitations of the **research**. Most of the "**research**" that exists and is presented here comes from **service-learning** program evaluations. One of these, the Brandeis study of "quality" **Learn** and Serve programs, is an evaluation that is national in scope, featuring surveys and observations at multiple sites with students who are tracked over two years and matched with a control group of students.(FN16) Even with a strong effort to select programs for quality, however, the programs that are actually evaluated vary greatly in implementation. Some of the studies, such as those by Daniel Weiler and colleagues and by Joseph Follman, are state-level evaluations.(FN17) Weiler and his colleagues selected "quality" programs in California to evaluate and used multiple methods, but they also found great variation in implementation that was not controlled in the study. Follman used a five-item self-report survey, administered to all **Learn** and Serve program coordinators in Florida. It is not clear whether these data can be validated. Most of the other studies are evaluations of particular **service-learning** programs, some of which are internationally implemented models, some of which are unique programs offered at multiple sites, and some of which are single-site models. Still other evaluations examined the effects of participating in any type of **service-learning** program.

Very few of the studies used control groups, and very few tracked whether the impacts were sustained over time. Many of the studies used self-reports or information from surveys administered before and after a **service** experience. Some used qualitative methods and case studies. Few, if any, tested hypotheses or cited the theoretical foundations under which the programs were being operated. The field is clearly a messy one, and far more and better **research** is needed. Still, the body of evidence to date is promising, and much of the evidence cited here is supported by similar results for **service-learning** found in the higher education literature.(FN18)

The information is organized here by the broad areas **on** which **service-learning** has an impact. First, there is an umbrella summary statement, followed by the major findings of the studies that support it. For details **on** each study, readers are urged to consult the original sources.

THE IMPACT OF SERVICE-LEARNING ON PERSONAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Service-learning has a positive effect **on** the personal development of public school youths.

- * Middle and high school students who engaged in high-quality **service-learning** programs showed increases in measures of personal and social responsibility, communication, and sense of educational competence.(FN19)

- * Students who engaged in **service-learning** ranked responsibility as a more important value and reported a higher sense of responsibility to their school than did comparison groups.(FN20)

- * Students perceive themselves to be more socially competent after engaging in **service-learning**.(FN21)

- * Students who engaged in **service-learning** were more likely to treat one another kindly, help one another, and care about doing their best.(FN22)

- * Students who engaged in **service-learning** were more likely to increase their sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy.(FN23)

- * Male middle-schoolers reported increased self-esteem and fewer behavioral problems after engaging in **service-learning**.(FN24)

- * No differences were found between **service-learning** and control group participants **on** measures of personal or social responsibility.(FN25)

Students who participate in **service-learning** are less likely to engage in "risk" behaviors.

- * Students in **service-learning** programs in elementary and middle schools showed reduced levels of alienation and behavioral problems.(FN26)

- * Students who engaged in **service-learning** were less likely to be referred to the office for disciplinary measures.(FN27)

- * High school and middle school students who were engaged in **service-learning** were less likely to engage in behaviors that lead to pregnancy or arrest.(FN28)

- * Middle school students who engaged in **service-learning** and experienced a structured health curriculum were less likely to engage in unprotected sexual activity or violent behavior.(FN29)

- * No differences were found between participants in **service-learning** and control groups **on** such risk behaviors as use of alcohol, illegal drugs, or weapons.(FN30)

Service-learning has a positive effect **on** students' interpersonal development and the ability to relate to culturally diverse groups.

- * Middle and elementary school students who participated in **service-learning** were better able to trust and be trusted by others, to be reliable, and to accept responsibility.(FN31)

- * High school students who participated in high-quality **service-learning** programs were more likely to develop bonds with more adults, to agree that they could **learn** from and work with the elderly and disabled, and to feel that they trusted others besides parents and teachers to whom they could turn for help.(FN32)

- * Students who engaged in **service-learning** showed greater empathy and cognitive complexity than did comparison groups.(FN33)

- * Students who engaged in high-quality **service-learning** programs reported greater acceptance of cultural diversity.(FN34)

- * Students who engaged in **service-learning** showed increases over time in their awareness of cultural differences and in their attitudes toward helping others.(FN35)

- * Students who participated in **service-learning** enjoyed helping others with projects, became more dependable, and felt more comfortable communicating with ethnically diverse groups.(FN36)

THE IMPACT OF **SERVICE-LEARNING** ON CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

Service-learning helps develop students' sense of civic and social responsibility and their citizenship skills.

- * Students who engaged in high-quality **service-learning** showed an increase in their awareness of community needs, believed that they could make a difference, and were committed to **service** now and later in life.(FN37)

- * High school students who participated in high-quality **service-learning** developed more sophisticated understandings of sociohistorical contexts, were likely to think about politics and morality in society, and were likely to consider how to effect social change.(FN38)

- * Elementary and middle school students who participated in **service-learning** developed a greater sense of civic responsibility and ethic of **service**.(FN39)

- * Students who engaged in **service-learning** increased their understanding of how government works.(FN40)

- * No differences were found between **service-learning** participants and others **on** measures of civic responsibility.(FN41)

Service-learning provides an avenue for students to become active, positive contributors to society.

- * High school students who participated in **service-learning** and **service** activities are more likely to be engaged in community organizations and to vote 15 years after their participation than those who did not participate.(FN42)

- * High school students from five states who participated in high-quality **service-learning** programs increased their political attentiveness, political knowledge, and desire to become more politically active.(FN43)

- * Students who engage in **service-learning** feel that they can "make a difference."(FN44)

- * Over 80% of participants in high-quality **service-learning** programs felt that they had made a positive contribution to the community.(FN45)

THE IMPACT OF **SERVICE-LEARNING** ON ACADEMIC LEARNING

Service-learning helps students acquire academic skills and knowledge.

- * Students in more than half of the high-quality **service-learning** schools studied showed moderate to strong gains **on** achievement tests in language arts or reading, improved engagement in school, an improved sense of educational accomplishment, and better homework completion.(FN46)

- * Participation in **service-learning** was associated with higher scores **on** the state test of basic skills(FN47) and higher grades.(FN48)

- * Students who participated in **service-learning** earned higher standardized test scores **on** Indiana's state assessment in third- and eighth-grade math and English than those who did not participate.(FN49)

- * Elementary school students who participated in **service-learning** scored higher **on** state tests that measure reading for information and mathematics than nonparticipating students.(FN50)

- * Eighty-three percent of schools with **service-learning** programs reported that the grade-point averages of participating students improved 76% of the time.(FN51)

* Middle and high school students who participated in **service-learning** tutoring programs increased their grade-point averages and test scores in reading/language arts and in math and were less likely to drop out of school.(FN52)

* Students who engaged in **service-learning** came to class **on** time more often, completed more classroom tasks, and took the initiative to ask questions more often.(FN53)

* Elementary and middle school students who participated in **service-learning** had improved problem-solving skills and increased interest in academics.(FN54)

Students who participate in **service-learning** are more engaged in their studies and more motivated to **learn**.

* Students who participated in high-quality **service-learning** showed greater gains in measures of school engagement and in mathematics achievement than control groups.(FN55)

* Students at all levels felt that they **learned** more in **service-learning** classes than in other classes.(FN56)

Service-learning is associated with increased student attendance.

* Schools that sponsor **service-learning** programs reported that attendance increased each year over a three-year period.(FN57)

* Students engaged in **service-learning** had higher attendance rates than their peers in control groups.(FN58)

THE IMPACT OF SERVICE-LEARNING ON CAREER EXPLORATION AND ASPIRATIONS

Service-learning helps students to become more knowledgeable and realistic about careers.

* Students who participated in **service-learning** reported gaining career skills and communication skills, along with increases in knowledge of career possibilities.(FN59)

* Students who engaged in high-quality **service-learning** developed positive work attitudes and skills.(FN60)

* Teachers believe that participation in **service-learning** increases career awareness.(FN61)

THE IMPACT OF SERVICE-LEARNING ON SCHOOLS

Service-learning results in greater mutual respect between teachers and students.

* Teachers and students in schools with high-quality **service-learning** programs reported an increase in mutual respect.(FN62)

* **Service-learning** builds cohesiveness and more positive peer relations (among students and among teachers), along with more positive relations between students and teachers.(FN63)

Service-learning improves the overall school climate.

* Educators and students in schools with strong **service-learning** programs reported more positive school climate as a result of a feeling of greater connectedness to the school(FN64) as well as decreased teacher turnover and increased teacher collegiality.(FN65)

Engaging in **service-learning** leads to discussions of teaching and **learning** and of best ways for students to **learn**.

* In schools that have more than 20% of teachers engaged in **service-learning**, the activities promote dialogue about the best ways that students **learn** and transfer information.(FN66)

* Educators involved in **service-learning** engage in ongoing reflection and analysis to determine how to improve educational **services** to students.(FN67)

THE IMPACT OF SERVICE-LEARNING ON COMMUNITIES

Service-learning leads to more positive perceptions of schools and youths **on** the part of community members.

* Community members who participate in **service-learning** as partners with the schools see youths as valued resources and positive contributors to the community.(FN68)

ADDITIONAL MEDIATORS

The **research** literature also points to a variety of mediating factors that influence both the presence and the strength of the impacts that were documented. For example, a number of studies suggested that the intensity and duration of a project are related to project outcomes.(FN69) Several pointed out that the more responsibility, autonomy, or choice afforded to students, the stronger the impacts.(FN70) Others showed that direct, sustained contact with the clients was responsible for more robust outcomes.(FN71) Still others emphasized the need for particular kinds of reflection or teacher quality.(FN72)

MEDIATORS AND OUTCOMES OF SCHOOL-BASED SERVICE-LEARNING

Taken as a whole, the body of **research** studies in the field of **service-learning** suggests a newer model for **service-learning**.(FN*) When **service-learning** meets an authentic community need and includes meaningful planning, **service**, reflection, and celebration, it typically succeeds in engaging students in the **learning** task. Most

studies attribute this outcome to the nature of **service-learning** as an activity that students perceive to be relevant, interesting, meaningful, and fun.

While **service-learning** increases student engagement in the **learning** task, this effect in itself is apparently not sufficient to produce robust student outcomes. Rather, a whole variety of program design characteristics appear to be necessary to shape the impact. These characteristics include a high degree of student responsibility for the **service**, a high degree of student autonomy (students empowered to make decisions, solve problems, and so forth), a high degree of student choice (both in the selection of **service** to be performed and in the planning and the evaluation of the activity), a high degree of direct contact with the **service** recipient (who receives **service** of some duration, not short-term, one-shot **service**), and high-quality reflection activities (reflection that connects the experience with content, skills, and values). In addition, well-prepared teachers who serve as active partners and knowledge mediators (but not as sole decision makers) and the quality indicators included in "Essential Elements" (page 663) are critical factors in determining student outcomes.

The specific content of the **service** activity also shapes outcomes in that the particular activity tends to dictate which kinds of impact will occur. For example, if the **service** is in the area of the environment, then the particular academic or civic or career outcomes will occur more often within a related field -- for example, higher grades in science, better understanding of ecology, greater caring about the environment, and better understanding of careers in environmental science.

The **research** seems to indicate that these conditions are sufficient to lead to a variety of personal development outcomes, such as a reduction in negative behaviors, an increase in a sense of self-efficacy and potency (belief that one can make a difference), resilience, social competence, and related constructs. However, these conditions are not sufficient to produce other outcomes. What is needed for each of these is a constellation of additional factors.

- * To achieve stronger academic outcomes, program designs must include intentional integration with specific subject matter in the curriculum (e.g., building a playground or wheelchair ramp needs to be explicitly connected with geometry), alignment with standards (since this is typically what is measured in test scores, grades, unit tests, and other measures of achievement), and reflection activities that use such higher-order thinking skills as analysis, evaluation, and problem solving as ways to understand the **service** activity and its relationship to community need. When these additional factors are present, strong academic outcomes -- as measured by enhanced **learning** of subject matter, higher grades, or higher test scores -- can result.

- * To achieve stronger civic responsibility outcomes, it is necessary for the teacher to help students make explicit connections with social or citizenship issues (e.g., connecting an analysis of why certain populations are less likely to vote with a voter registration drive or helping students understand cultural views of aging when they are working with the elderly). When students go through this process, strong civic responsibility outcomes -- e.g., increased likelihood of voting or serving as a community volunteer; caring about society, the community, and others; and understanding social, economic, and political forces -- can result.

- * To achieve career-related outcomes, it is necessary for the program design to include intentional connections to workplace skills, career pathways, or job knowledge.

THE NEED FOR MORE AND BETTER RESEARCH

By following the directions outlined in the existing **research** literature, researchers can begin to design multi-site, experimental and quasi-experimental longitudinal studies that can test the effects of various program characteristics, using structural equation modeling and other sophisticated quantitative techniques. More and better qualitative **research** is also needed to provide deeper understandings and texture to our knowledge of how **service-learning** produces its outcomes.

Researchers can derive many useful and testable propositions, and future **research** can ultimately help practitioners understand how to improve practice and programs. There is not enough **research** to date to know which types of students are most affected, which specific program designs are most powerful, what type of reciprocity with **service** recipients is needed, how connected to the community the **service** needs to be, what impacts occur **on** the school as an organization or **on** the community as an entity, and so **on**. Collecting more and better-quality data about **service-learning** will help to establish its credibility as a pedagogy and its legitimacy as a reform strategy.

In the past decade, **service-learning** has spread widely across the country, and the number of enthusiastic supporters has grown dramatically. Yet, curiously, given the activist nature of most **service-learning**, few researchers have been drawn to study **service-learning** and its effects. The field needs to mobilize its supporters to attract more interest and funding to conduct better long-term studies.

With more and better **research** in the next decade, the passion with which practitioners pursue **service-learning** and believe in its outcomes can be supported in more conventional and data-based ways. A

decade ago, Conrad and Hedin wrote:

Only time will tell whether the current interest among politicians and educators in strengthening the **service** ethic of our nation's youth will be sustained or whether new priorities or the same old pressures for higher test scores and improved basic skills will keep youth **service on** the fringes of the political and educational agenda.(FN73)

That conclusion still rings true. Only time will tell whether **service-learning** will be sustained and whether the ethic of **service**, combined with powerful **learning** strategies, will become institutionalized as an important philosophy, pedagogy, and value within our schools.

ADDED MATERIAL

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Illustration by Karen Stolper

FOOTNOTES

* A schematic of the model described here is available at <http://www.LearningInDeed.org>.

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ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

1. In effective **service-learning**, there are clear educational goals that require the application of concepts, content, and skills from the academic disciplines and involve students in the construction of their own knowledge.

2. In effective **service-learning**, students are engaged in tasks that challenge and stretch them cognitively and developmentally.

3. In effective **service-learning**, assessment is used as a way to enhance student **learning** as well as to document and evaluate how well students have met content and skill standards.

4. In effective **service-learning**, students are engaged in **service** tasks that have clear goals, meet genuine needs in the school or community, and have significant consequences for themselves and others.

5. In effective **service-learning**, formative and summative evaluation are employed in a systematic evaluation of the **service** effort and its outcome.

6. In effective **service-learning**, student voice is maximized in selecting, designing, implementing, and evaluating the **service** project.

7. In effective **service-learning**, diversity is valued as demonstrated by its participants, its practice, and its outcomes.

8. In effective **service-learning**, communication and interaction with the community are promoted and partnerships and collaboration are encouraged.

9. In effective **service-learning**, Students are prepared for all aspects of their **service** work. They possess a clear understanding of tasks and roles, as well as the skills and information required by the tasks; awareness of safety precautions; and knowledge about and sensitivity to the people with whom they will be working.

10. In effective **service-learning**, student reflection takes place before, during, and after **service**; uses multiple methods that encourage critical thinking; and is a central force in the design and fulfillment of curricular objectives.

11. In effective **service-learning**, multiple methods are designed to acknowledge, celebrate, and further validate students' **service** work.

Source: National **Service-Learning** Cooperative, Essential Elements of **Service-Learning** (St. Paul, Minn.: National Youth Leadership Council, April 1998).