



Strategies for Transformative Change: A White Paper on Service-Learning and the Blueprint for Education Reform

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Current Challenges and Needs

Our communities depend upon citizens who have developed the integrated critical thinking that is required to meet the challenges of an interconnected world. Our schools need to develop meaningful, mutually beneficial collaborations between schools and the community, a shared ownership of the educational process across all constituencies, and a system which fully prepares students for the 21st century workforce. By fundamentally changing the vision, leadership, and instructional practices in our schools, academic service-learning increases the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to develop globally competitive citizens. Through this process, students are meaningfully engaged to adapt, synthesize, and evaluate the skills and knowledge gained in the formal academic curriculum as they address an identified need in the community.

Principals report that service-learning has a positive impact on teacher satisfaction, school climate, academic achievement, and school engagement. Research demonstrates that successful teachers are those who are adequately prepared to use instructional strategies that challenge students to use higher order thinking skills, engage students in solving complex problems, probe for deeper learning, and seek opportunities for students to transfer knowledge from one context to another (Rosenshine & Furst, 1973; Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Pease, 1983; Brophy & Good, 1986; National Research Council, 1999). Teachers who use service-learning are significantly more likely to use high quality teaching strategies like cooperative learning, participate in projects integrating technology and requiring data collection, use primary resources, and make meaningful connections to the community (Billig, Root, and Jesse, 2005). Yet, of the estimated 53.3 million youth in our country, only 4.7 million K-12 students are reported to have been engaged in any kind of service-learning experiences (Spring, K., Grimm, R., & Dietz, N., 2008).

Positioning service-learning as a key strategy for achieving the goals outlined in the *Blueprint for Education Reform* will result in:

- 1. Increasing academic achievement.** Students who benefit from quality service-learning experiences have been shown to make significantly greater gains in academic achievement than nonparticipating students. Across a number of studies conducted on service-learning programs, test scores on state assessments have been demonstrated to be higher in reading, writing, mathematics, social studies, and science for students that participated in service-learning (Davila and Mora, 2007; Meyer, Billig & Hofschire, 2004; Klute & Billig, 2002).
- 2. Strengthening teacher quality.** Research conducted over the past few decades has shown that teacher quality is a major variable in determining students' academic success (Sanders & Horn, 1998). In addition, a meta-analysis of research conducted by Marzano (2003) identified a number of instructional strategies that have been shown to have a strong relationship to student achievement. These strategies are supported in academic service-learning through meeting the K-12 Service-Learning Standards of Quality Practice.
- 3. Building a successful school climate.** School climate affects student learning, social-emotional growth, attendance, and risk prevention. A series of research on this topic confirms that academic performance is increased when the school climate is safe, caring, participatory, and responsive (Brookover, et. al, 1977; Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1979; Freiberg, 1999; Good & Weinstein, 1986; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1989; Griffith, 1995; Madaus, Airasian, & Kellaghan, 1980; Rutter, 1983; Shipman, 1981). Academic service-learning provides a model for a positive school climate that embraces youth as a partner in the learning process.

Students' academic performance, civic engagement, and social-emotional functioning will improve when teachers and administrators are equipped with the skills they need to incorporate service-learning as a strategy for transforming our schools. However, significant school reform does not happen by accident, nor does it happen in isolation. We believe we must take a systems approach to the process, shaping plans that are reflective of research-based approaches in vision and leadership, curriculum and assessment, professional development, school-community collaborations, and continuous improvement. Service-learning will guide the transformation of school systems through changes to policy, infrastructure, and ongoing support that lead to increased student outcomes.

A Well-Rounded Education for College- and Career-Ready Students

The first priority identified in *A Blueprint for Reform* is, justifiably, ensuring that every student graduates from high school ready for college or a career. Our society cannot afford a downward trend in educational indicators (e.g., high school graduation rates, academic success, comparisons with other countries) if we are going to provide an environment of personal and economic success for current and future generations. In this increasingly technologically

integrated world, we cannot rest on past laurels if we want to continue to be a world leader and contributing member of the global society.

We must ensure that challenging learning standards undergird the educational program for each student. Unfortunately, even with the advent of state standards, there has been inconsistency and too great a variation in both rigor and implementation. Clearly, without consistent and challenging learning goals and targets, we cannot expect our students to be ready for college or careers, and we certainly cannot expect that they will be prepared to meet the needs of a global society.

However, simply identifying the standards will not ensure that our students reach high levels of academic learning and meaningful application. One cannot separate the student's desire or inspiration to learn from preparation for college and careers. The transformation of learning comes from engagement with the learning standards—making them tangible. Students must not only “know and understand” the standards, they also must be able to apply the identified content and skills in a variety of ways. If they cannot experience the relevance and cohesion within their world, they will not be able to expand their understanding and application to a variety of situations.

Service-learning provides the opportunity and structure for students to apply standards in real-life situations, to make connections, and to ascertain the relevance between their classroom learning and the communities in which they live. It is through application and problem-solving that students deepen their understanding and commitment to expanded learning. Service-learning provides the avenue for helping students connect content to the world around them in a way that not only engages them, but also enhances learning and actualizes the civic mission of schools. Service-learning, then, is not simply an instructional strategy; it is an essential avenue to connect students to academic learning, competence, and service to the community.

More than ever, the world in which we live mandates a strong background in literacy, the sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics while being rich in the arts, world languages, history and civics, and the environment. We cannot be a truly educated society without citizens who understand the importance of all disciplines and without schools that provide extensive opportunities for each student to learn and demonstrate learning within and across all areas. Service-learning provides the structure to embed that learning in application and to strengthen teaching and learning—resulting in greater achievement and a well-rounded education.

The critical nature of making learning relevant and engaging cannot be overestimated. Research has pointed to the importance of both relevance and rigor for deepened student learning and for personal investment in the work. In *The Silent Epidemic*, John Bridgeland reported findings in which dropouts identified what would have kept them in school, and the association between

school and work was emphasized. According to the report “four out of five [dropouts] (81%) said there should be more opportunities for real-world learning, and some in the focus groups called for more experiential learning. They said students need to see the connection between school and getting a good job” (Bridgeland, 2006). Applied learning should be the background of instructional programs for all students, even those with high achievement levels, so that they leave school more than just “book smart.”

Too often learning in school is placed into separate classes and courses, even silos, so that natural connections found outside the school building are not emphasized or identified within the curriculum when, in reality, the world is integrated on every level. When we fail to provide students with the opportunity to connect one discipline with another, we do them a great disservice and make it more difficult for them to apply the concepts of a subject area within meaningful contexts. The power of an integrated curriculum has been discussed for years, and service-learning provides a natural means for implementing an integrated curriculum while highlighting the interrelationships of various disciplines. As students identify problems and use their learning to provide solutions, they make connections at every level.

The critical triad of the classroom is curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and service-learning is connected to each. The connection to curriculum and instruction might seem obvious, but the relationship with assessment is just as strong. Whether used formatively or summatively, service-learning provides direct opportunities to assess student learning. In fact, monitoring the progress of both student learning and program implementation is one of the national, service-learning standards: “Service-learning engages participants in an ongoing process to assess the quality of implementation and progress toward meeting specified goals, and uses results for improvement.”

Because of the emphasis on student investigation and the identification of issues and problems to be addressed, students are engaged in a process of evaluation that allows for ongoing formative assessment as part of learning. Data collection becomes a core aspect of this work, providing the opportunity to again connect to the real world while developing key aspects of assessment. Reflection engages students in an analysis of their work, roles, and progress and provides an opportunity to restructure or revise components of their project, all of which engages students in higher levels of learning. The final stage in a service-learning experience provides for a demonstration of the impact the project has had both on the community and the student. This form of summative assessment again applies an aspect of relevance to what is typically a school-based function. When students can analyze the impact of their work on others, they have moved their learning to a new level.

Equity and Opportunity

Nearly 7,200 students drop out of our schools every school day, which means that almost 1.3 million students annually will not graduate from high school with their graduating class. That problem is even more severe for minority students with nearly 50% of black and Hispanic students failing to complete high school on time. There are tremendous challenges in both our urban and rural communities where poverty has an increasingly negative impact on student success.

By identifying high needs, low-performing, schools and districts as priorities for funding and support, the U.S. Department of Education is directing attention in appropriate areas. However, if students are not in school, there is no opportunity to learn. As we work to improve our schools and ensure that every student has the opportunity to learn, we must include students in that work. If we listen to students, they will provide great insights into the causes of the dropout crisis and potential solutions. Students have reported that they simply do not find classes interesting or engaging and are not inspired or motivated to work, but would have worked harder if asked to do meaningful, high-quality work. (Bridgeland, 2006). Further, according to the 2010 Gallup Student Poll, only one-third of American students are ready for the future; that is, are hopeful for the future, engaged in school, and thriving in life. Additionally, 23% of students are not engaged, and 14% are actively disengaged. This disengagement leads directly to a decision to leave school before they graduate.

If there is such disconnect between school and student engagement, it is obvious that we must use avenues to engage or reengage students. We, once again, propose that the use of service-learning can assist with connecting students to the world around them and their futures. Further, it empowers students to think about their education differently and allows students to take a role in driving their learning, which provides validity to their voices and opinions.

Highlights from some of the service-learning research that has been published to date includes:

- Studies have shown that service-learning can significantly reduce the achievement gap between affluent and low-income students. Low-income students who participated in service opportunities and had lengthier participation in service-learning had better school attendance and grades than low-income students who did not participate. (Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmeier, & Benson, 2006).
- A review of data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) suggested that students who participated in service-learning activities in high school were 22 percent more likely to graduate from college than those who did not participate.
- A variety of studies have shown a range of achievement-related benefits from service-learning, including improved attendance, higher grade point averages, enhanced

preparation for the workforce, enhanced awareness and understanding of social issues, greater motivation for learning, and heightened engagement in pro-social behaviors.

Academic service-learning holds tremendous promise for increasing graduation rates, particularly in reducing the achievement gap. We know that academic service-learning reflects sound instructional practices. We know that increasing the use of instructional strategies grounded in inquiry-based teaching, high-level thinking skills, and methods reflecting brain research moves learning to a higher level. We also know that using strategies that require students to take an active role in both the learning and assessment process and take greater ownership of their learning will result in higher academic growth. As importantly, providing students with opportunities to practice active citizenship throughout their educational careers increases the likelihood of lifelong engagement in their communities. High quality service-learning puts these principles into practice and improves student access to learning.

A Blueprint for Reform outlined the use of formula grants to meet the needs of the underserved through:

- Migrant education
- Homeless children and youths education
- Neglected and delinquent children and youths education
- Indian, Native Hawaiian, and Alaska Native education

Clearly, creating the services and programs to meet the needs of underserved students is not simple. However, in each case there is a strong need to connect these students with their schools and communities, and we propose that service-learning is a natural avenue to make these connections. This becomes increasingly important for students who feel disengaged or detached from their schools and communities, a scenario that is all too often disproportionately the case with underserved populations. It is clear that when addressing the academic focus of the classroom, service-learning plays a powerful role. Because it engages students in ways that traditional classroom instruction cannot, it opens the doors for all students to excel—becoming the great equalizer.

Successful, Safe, and Healthy Students

If every student is to become a productive, successful adult, we must create schools that provide an education which is both rigorous and relevant within a school climate that nurtures the development of each individual as an engaged participant in a vibrant community. Using the skills and knowledge gained from the core curriculum in order to better our world through experiences such as service-learning puts education in a meaningful context. It is this meaningful

context that forms the basis of a school climate which ensures academic and behavioral success for all students.

Significant bodies of work have established the importance of school climate in achieving our educational goals. A positive, safe, caring environment that fosters meaningful learning develops more successful students and productive citizens. The evidence of the impact school climate has on positive student outcomes is abundant. Connecting the classroom experience to the larger community through service-learning experiences fosters a sense of belonging to both the school and community-at-large. Many schools utilizing service-learning methodology have documented the positive effect these experiences have on attendance rates, school climate, and students' motivation and self-responsibility. The Search Institute (Scales & Leffert, 1999) documents the following outcomes related to a school climate that establishes a caring atmosphere for students:

- Higher grades, engagement, attendance, expectations and aspirations, a sense of scholastic competence, fewer school suspensions, and on-time progression through grades
- Higher self-esteem and self-concept
- Less anxiety, depression and loneliness
- Less substance abuse

Students need to be engaged in centers of learning that value who they are and what they have to say; offer physical, emotional, and academic support; and challenge them to grow into successful citizens who contribute meaningfully to the world around them. As school administrators have faced increasing demands for accountability, it has become clear that school initiatives must be able to demonstrate how programmatic efforts will result in positive changes in student performance. As noted in the research on the importance of school climate, student performance is either hindered or improved by the school climate, which sets the tone for the policies, practices, and beliefs within which school functioning is grounded.

We know that there are particular strategies that are used in successful schools which result in a school climate that meaningfully engages students, develops academic proficiency, and creates a strong sense of belonging. Incorporating service-learning into how we “do” education serves as an effective means of implementing school reform initiatives to actively engage students in their academic growth. By offering young people meaningful ways to understand and apply academic skills, a greater sense of ownership is developed, and schools are better able to meet the mandates required by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. It is a critical component that both requires and helps to create “quality environments where students develop the skills

and dispositions that support their ability to work, love, and contribute to a vibrant and participatory democracy necessary to confront the changes and transitions that lie ahead.” (Cohen, Fege, & Pickeral, 2009).

As educators work to develop positive, safe, and healthy spaces in which students learn, it is imperative that changes be made across the system that result in a climate which engages students and staff meaningfully, nurtures supportive relationships, and makes positive connections to the community. Schools that most effectively provide environments that develop safe, successful, and healthy students involve all stakeholders in this process. Change will only happen effectively when the school climate is co-created by the youth and adults throughout the school and community. Shared vision and ownership will result in a school climate that positively shapes our children’s – and our communities – futures (Cohen, Fege, & Pickeral, 2009).

Effective Teachers

Literature on service-learning addresses the significant benefits for student learning and engagement; however, another critical, supportive element of service-learning is the positive impact it can have on teaching and the development of effective teachers. As cited in *A Blueprint for Reform*, “Of all the work that occurs at every level of our education system, the interaction between teacher and student is the primary determinant of student success.” Service-learning requires that teachers think differently about both teaching and learning.

Active pedagogies and inquiry-based instruction are the very methodologies that develop the 21st century skills our students need to succeed in their communities and workplace. Service-learning effectively addresses these 21st century skills, while also engaging students in their communities and meeting one of the essential, and neglected, functions of schooling: preparing students for active and effective citizenship.

What service-learning provides is an authentic platform not only for learning and the demonstration of that learning, but also for establishing positive interactions between the student and teacher. Service-learning is built upon a factor of trust-- between student and student, teacher and student, school and community, and there is some research connecting trust with student learning and teacher effectiveness. A study by Corrigan and Chapman (2008) made a connection between gains in teacher effectiveness and sharing responsibilities with students—working to build common, trusting bonds.

“Trust is a fundamental element in the pursuit of higher learning for it is only through a sense of trust that students will embrace an empowering sense of freedom, and the exercise of this freedom requires a risk on behalf of students and their teacher.” (Curzon-Hobson, 2002)

The establishment of situations of trust requires that the teachers have confidence in their own knowledge and skill base, pedagogy, and relationships with youth. Implementation of service-learning provides evidence of teacher content knowledge and skill application and deepens understanding for both the student and teacher, and provides avenues for success through rich interactions with students.

It is well-documented that ongoing high quality professional development is an important element in changing instructional practices. To be successful, teachers need adequate preparation, including both education in content and instruction and ongoing professional development to hone their skills. They need to continue learning as new research on effectiveness comes to light. Providing a process for more teachers to learn how to successfully use service-learning can transform the teaching profession, our classrooms, and our communities.

Through appropriate professional development, teachers will learn to create effective service-learning experiences that deepen understanding and increase student views of personal impact on society while providing opportunities to evaluate the depth of learning. It is through service-learning that the triad of curriculum, instruction, and assessment become a reality; and teacher impact on student learning is realized.

Call for Action

Based on the evidence collected through service-learning and broader educational research, we suggest that high quality service-learning is an effective component of successful schools which leads to increased academic achievement, student engagement, and preparation for the 21st century workplace. Transformative change can happen in our schools through the use of the cross-cutting strategy of service-learning to address needs across the system by simultaneously adopting the five critical components for institutionalization: Vision and leadership, curriculum and assessment, community-school partnerships, professional development, and continuous improvement.

Leadership institutes and support systems that assist school and district leaders in implementing the above components are critical to helping educational leaders move toward a systems change model. Exemplar models need to be developed that demonstrate how to put research into practice, create a common vision and environment of shared leadership that brings together all stakeholders in support of this vision, and outlines a set of effective strategies for enacting change across the system.

To better prepare our teachers, we need to foster the advancement of service-learning in teacher preparation programs through funding priorities and high quality teacher requirements. Effective

professional development for in-service teachers should utilize a cascade model of professional development in service-learning that provides ongoing skill development, modeling of best practices, implementation that fosters continuous improvement, and nurturing lead teachers to serve as a mentor for other educators.

We must place an emphasis on increased state level support and public policy to advance service-learning as part of education reform and teacher quality initiatives. Federal, state, and local policy development needs to identify this transformative change process as a priority while allocating or prioritizing funding for districts to institutionalize service-learning throughout the educational experience, incorporating the instructional practice into the expectation for all teachers as well as the assessment process in documenting student progress.

Rather than simply “tinkering at the edges”, simultaneously incorporating service-learning into the change process throughout each of these avenues will result in systemic change that supports schools in becoming thriving 21st century centers of learning that effectively prepare students for college and the workplace.

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