

Five rules separate high-quality service learning from community service.

Long ago when I was in graduate school, I learned a lot of theories. One of them was about how people make choices: Consciously or not, people weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each option and choose the one that they perceive has the most benefit. They don't always consider all of the options or even the veracity of the advantages they see, but they opt for those that seem to be the most advantageous.

Now, this is not an earth-shattering theory, but it always leaps to mind when I talk to principals about service learning. Why would schools want to take on one more thing to do? Service learning is a lot of work and it's a change from business as usual, which many teachers just don't like. Principals wonder whether the advantages will outweigh the costs, in terms of time, training, money, and other resources. But the bottom line for most principals is how service learning will affect their students.

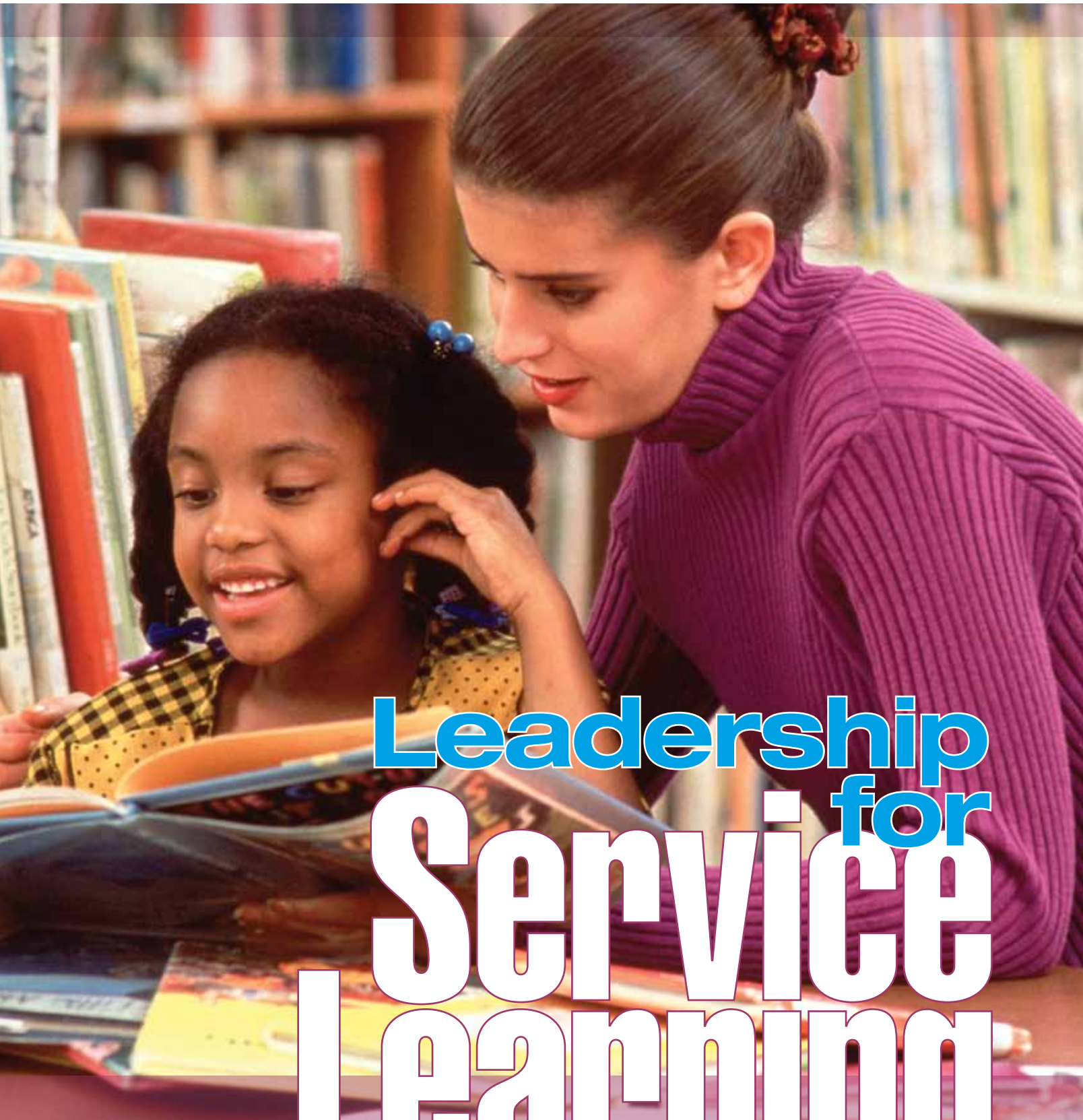
Learn the Rules

Service learning is a promising practice, but like other instructional practices, it must be done well to produce positive outcomes. I have found that following five “rules” of service learning will likely result in improved academic engagement and positive academic, civic, and social outcomes among students. Energy and collaboration among faculty members will increase, as will the service's measurable effect on the community. The rules will result in more school-community partnerships, greater media attention, and more community support.

Do It Well

The first rule is to understand what service learning is—and what it is not—and do it well. When students provide service in the community as a way of learning important academic objectives while meeting a real community need, they are engaged in service learning. The objectives may be linked to a content area or to another academic purpose, such as acquiring 21st century skills or drop-out prevention or applied learning. Some people also link service learning to nonacademic but still school-related objectives, such as civic engagement and character development. Service learning can help meet all of those objectives, too, because it is a value-added strategy, which in this case simply means that service learning typically affects multiple areas when it's done well. The point, though, is that service must be linked to a learning objective for it to be service learning. That's why community service—such as picking up trash by





Leadership for Service Learning



The five rules for service learning leadership

- Do service learning well.
- Meet a real community need.
- Help all service learning participants identify and document a community need and measure impact when the service has been completed so that documentation of community impact is established.
- Allocate appropriate resources and support for high quality practice.
- Be visible in your support.

the highway—is a great thing, but it is not the same as service learning. That’s also why service learning has so many more outcomes than community service.

In fact, when done well, service learning is related to a whole constellation of important academic outcomes. High-quality service learning is related to improved test scores, improved attendance, and fewer disciplinary referrals (Billig, 2009). When done well, service learning leads to greater student civic engagement, more socially responsible behavior, and greater self-efficacy. When done well, service learning also is associated with more cohesive faculties, renewed passion among faculty members, and measurable effects on the community. When it is not implemented with fidelity to the K–12 standards and indicators of high-quality practice, however, results can be minimal.

MEET A NEED

Students can help senior citizens or the homeless improve the environment, create transportation or housing policy, tutor peers or younger students or their family members, rescue animals, create hospital brochures for children, build playgrounds, provide nature walks for the disabled, build information boards for tourists—there is no end to the types of service that students can provide. Service learning must address a real need, however, and that need should be at least partially met for students to feel good and efficacious about their effort.

Service learning activities must also be meaningful to students, which is why they should be the ones to pick the projects and decide the activities, the division of labor, and the way they will document outcomes. Talking about various perspectives and diversity, what it takes to have a good partnership with community members, and making explicit links to content standards or other learning objectives are other key indicators of quality service learning.

MEASURE THE NEED

Meeting a real community need works best when the students measure the need before and then after they provided the service. That way, the effect of their efforts can be quantified and documented. This has two advantages: First, the process supports teaching students to define reasonable expectations (analysis), measure impact (mathematics), set goals (21st century skill), provide evidence for outcomes (literacy, math, and science), and display evidence for documentation (mathematics, logic, and persuasion). Second, showing how the school has helped the community promotes school-community partnerships.

ALLOCATE RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

As with any new pedagogy, leaders must support teacher learning and practice. To learn to do service learning well, teachers must be exposed to quality practices, shown how to derive the strongest results, and convinced that the effort is worth their time. School leaders, then, must provide the same sorts of supports that they do for any effective instructional practice, including allocating funds and time for professional development, collaborative and independent planning, and models or templates that make planning easier.

With regard to funding, service learning is typically not an expensive venture. Students usually do not require a lot of materials or supplies to implement service learning, although some schools provide journals. Instead, the expenses tend to come in three forms: professional development; transportation (if provided); and a salary for a coordinator.

Professional development. This, of course, is the key pathway to doing service learning well. School leaders must decide whether to conduct professional development on site so that it can be customized or to provide funds to attend conferences or seminars, which provide more synergy with others undergoing the same journey.

Time allocation. High-quality service learning requires practitioners to devote enough time to allow students to investigate the community problems, identify which needs to address and establish a baseline, develop a plan of action, implement the service activities, and demonstrate their impact. High-quality service learning also requires teachers to facilitate students' reflections on the process. Students should explicitly reflect on their investigations into the needs of the community, their options for meeting those needs, why the needs arose, and how they are connected to social policy. Students should also analyze what worked well and what worked less well, document the effects of the service on the community and on their own thinking and themselves, and convey that information to stakeholders using multiple means. Clearly, teachers must have professional development and time for planning so that they can facilitate such work.

Transportation. Transportation can be tricky if the community service need is not within walking distance of the school. Students' safety must be guaranteed, so public transportation may not be an option. If transportation becomes a major issue, service learning projects may need to be within walking distance or even confined to the school grounds. Confining the service to the school grounds is not so bad: students can still tackle nutrition and fitness, school beautification, community gardening, recycling, gang prevention, and so forth.

A coordinator. Most leaders think that funds for a coordinator are worth the investment because that person can really help the teachers. Often, leaders allocate part of a counselor's time or even pay for a parent coordinator to help. Some hire a part-time teacher or social worker. The only skills that the coordinator really needs are strong interpersonal ones and the ability to pay attention to detail. The coordinator often makes the initial contact with potential community partners and must

maintain relationships with them. The coordinator also works closely with the students and the teachers and communicates frequently with the school leader.

The coordinator may also work with the media so that the service learning gets featured in local newspapers or television programming. Typically, a coordinator helps students identify and research community needs; helps identify and research appropriate community partners; conducts the outreach to the partners; helps plan and implement the activities, reflections, evaluations, and documentation of the effects of the service learning.

BE VISIBLE IN YOUR SUPPORT

Service learning is powerful, and many teachers are very passionate about it once they have tried it. Others are more tentative, however, and complain about the time needed to implement service learning and may be worried that because learning is not sequential and well connected to a specific scope and sequence, they will be judged poorly on teacher evaluations.

Although service learning may be messy, it is far more engaging than most educational practices, and the learning that comes from it tends to be sustained for greater periods of time. Students who learn geometry by building playgrounds, for example, remember how to measure angles. Those who learn about World War II by interviewing veterans and putting together a video of their experiences remember the politics of the war. Those who demonstrate that they have reduced traffic accidents by successfully persuading the transportation board to put a stop light in place remember how to put together a persuasive argument and build graphs and charts. Those who build nature trails remember the names of plants and trees and why they should protect the environment. In short, experiential learning is retained for a longer period of time and, when facilitated well, helps students transfer their learning and demonstrate it in many ways,

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Service Learning as an Instructional Strategy?

I often do a little exercise during presentations about service learning that asks for the top 10 reasons to conduct service learning. Interestingly, students as well as teachers list academic and civic purposes in their top 10. Inevitably, however, within those top 10 are also such phrases as, “It’s fun,” “It is more engaging than other academic approaches,” and “Students get to apply what they learned and use higher order thinking skills.”

The concepts of fun, student-directed learning, engagement, and applied learning all have a basis in the literature about how people learn best and retain the most information (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; National Research Council, 2003). Service learning, when done well, is engaging, challenging, and fun and gives students ways to be independent and interdependent, undertake challenging and realistic tasks, and develop teaming skills. All of those skills are also part of what students must develop to become 21st century citizens.

But service learning also has a serious academic purpose. It takes planning, time, and creativity, sometimes even more than traditional instruction. Service learning definitely requires professional development to learn what it means to implement it well and to learn how to set parameters in the classroom so that there is the right balance between student autonomy and teacher control. That’s where leadership comes in.

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including on tests of academic achievement.

Leaders who provide visible support for the students who are engaged in service learning, the teachers who facilitate it, and the community partners find that the practice becomes valued in the community and that learning is deepened in the classroom. There is also the added benefit of attracting more partners to the school and more-visible outcomes for education. In several cases, this visible support has even added to the momentum for passing school bonds.

Keeping It Going

Sustainability in service learning tends to follow the same path as it does for other innovations. If you as leader have done a good job with your stakeholders, both internal—teachers, students, staff members, and parents—and external—the community and the media—you will find that sustainability is pretty easy, especially if you get documented results in academics.

Sustainability can be enhanced, of course, when leaders take specific steps:

- First, ensure that service learning is codified, that it appears in school or district policies or procedures. In particular, service learning tends to become institutionalized if mission statements include such goals as nurturing the development of good or 21st century citizens and if barriers to participation are removed.
- Second, share leadership and best practices for service learning. Master teachers who help others implement best practices and study groups and who demonstrate effective strategies, planning, reflections, and demonstrations of learning are invaluable.
- Third, have a budget line item and designate a coordinator to ensure that teachers get the support they need and to encourage ongoing motivation.
- Fourth, get the board on board. The best way to do this, of course, is to have the students talk about their activities and impact. Students who participate in service learning projects tend to be a school’s best advocates because the experience is transformational for some, fun for most, and educational for all.
- Finally, do service learning well. Without fidelity to quality standards, the effect of service learning simply is not great and you will be left with just the “feel good” and “right thing to do” argu-

ments, which are often not enough to sustain a practice, especially in times of academic accountability.

Final Caution

Service learning is not a magic bullet and does not benefit all students and all schools equally. When service learning is not done well, it is not effective. Service learning will not teach students how to read and will not achieve many other important academic outcomes. It can be a powerful intervention, however, especially in schools where students seem disengaged or need to learn about their own efficacy. Service learning can be especially important in schools that are trying to promote

deeper and more sustained learning or teach students a better sense of their social responsibilities and place in the world. Most leaders find that service learning is worth the effort. I hope you see it that way too. **PL**

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