


Personal Power & the Common Good

An illustration of two hands in a dark red color, reaching upwards from the right side of the page. The top hand is positioned higher than the bottom hand, and both are open with fingers slightly spread. The background is a solid light beige color.



Authentic service learning in city schools helps students work toward important change in their own communities. Students are able to face and address issues that have an immediate impact on their neighbors and themselves. Two examples from Chicago neighborhoods illustrate how powerful the concept is: Students worked with a community organization to conduct a neighborhood canvassing project to promote an affordable housing ordinance that would create more housing opportunities for community members. Across town, students mobilized to educate residents about financial literacy and the resources and the support that were available to families that were at risk of losing their homes to foreclosure. Through such work, the students became actors in society, many for the first time. It was a powerful transformation.

So what does it take to enable students in city schools to engage in the important social issues through service learning? Surprisingly, the answer isn't just to require more service. The Commission for National and Community Service (2008) recently published a study about the state of community service and service learning in the United States. The study reported that the number of schools and school districts that use some form of service requirement has increased from 64% to 68% since 1999. The number of schools using service learning, however, has decreased from a high of 32% in 1999 to 24% in 2008.

To explain those statistics, it is necessary to draw a clear distinction between community service and service learning. Community service requirements ask students to volunteer in their community without making curricular connections. Students are generally asked to turn in a time sheet and perhaps a brief reflection on their volunteer work. The hours tend to become the focal point for students. Although many students may have wonderful volunteer experiences, their experiences are not incorporated into the culture of learning at the school.

Service learning, on the other hand, explicitly connects classroom content and learning with service project experiences, such as when students in an environmental science class who are learning about the scientific and social dimensions of climate change conduct a carbon emissions inventory at their school and make recommendations to shrink the school's carbon footprint.



Service learning in urban schools creates a bond between students and their communities.

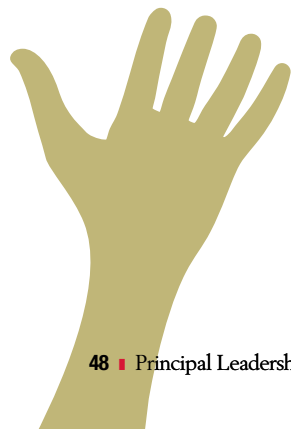
Empowerment comes from understanding that seemingly individual problems are connected to larger forces and policy.

Students learn how to make a difference and gain valuable knowledge and skills in the process.



Photos courtesy of Jon Schmidt

When quality practice standards are met through service-learning experiences, the gains in positive student outcomes in the academic, social, and civic domains far outpace a community service program.



So why has more service translated to less service learning? A community service requirement or program is relatively painless to implement; a commitment to service learning requires the development of infrastructure within a school and a district to support and sustain teacher and student engagement and participation. The necessary resources for schools are:

- Professional development for teachers
- Curricular and project resources
- Community partnership opportunities.

But the most important resource is leadership. Principals must be outspoken advocates for service learning as a top-notch civic engagement strategy. And at least one teacher must lead the school's effort with passion and energy.

Remarkable Returns

Education leaders in Chicago encourage service learning because it delivers remarkable returns for students and communities. According to Billig (2009), when quality practice standards are met through service-learning experiences, the gains in positive student outcomes in the academic, social, and civic domains far outpace a community service program. Those standards include meaningful service, links to curricula, community partnerships, youth voice, diversity, reflection, progress monitoring,

and duration and intensity.

The research holds true for urban, suburban, and rural students. But service learning holds particular promise for urban students, especially in large districts that suffer from high drop-out rates, high incidents of violence, disengaged students, and lagging test scores.

Teacher-Led Change

Four years ago, teachers at Kelvyn Park High School in Chicago, IL, approached their principal with an intriguing idea. They proposed creating a social justice academy (SJA) to enable freshmen to pursue questions of social justice through the lens of literature and service learning. Fifty randomly selected students were enrolled in the initial English course; the remaining freshmen were assigned to a more-traditional course. Although SJA started out as a freshman English class, it has expanded to include all subjects for freshmen and sophomores. At the heart of SJA is a commitment to pursue challenging questions of social concern, but students did not just examine social issues in their classroom through text and discussion, they chose a social issue and acted on it.

Texts provide the entry point for social context and action. All sophomore students read *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry as an introduction to the social problem of fair



Service learning in an urban context is intimate. It is about responding to issues in the immediate community with an eye toward building the common good.

and affordable housing. Although the play was written more than 50 years ago, students readily understand the dislocation caused by neighborhood gentrification and limited access to affordable housing. Many have seen friends and family forced out of apartments and homes because of condo conversions, skyrocketing real estate costs, and higher property taxes. Many have also witnessed the acceleration of foreclosed homes in their neighborhoods and an economic and cultural shift as a working-class Latino neighborhood became a middle- and upper-income White neighborhood.

Students in the initial SJA class chose to tackle the problem of aggressive development in the Logan Square community of Chicago. Through research, they were able to identify a local organization that was working to promote a balanced economic development strategy to protect residents and businesses with deep roots in the community and to slow the development of high-priced condominiums. SJA students joined the campaign as part of their classroom work and as a way to fulfill the district's graduation requirement of 40 service hours.

Not only did the students make great progress toward their service graduation requirement, but they also exceeded academic expectations when measured against their peers in a more-traditional classroom. In 2006, 62% of all freshmen at Kelvyn Park were on track to graduate; 83% of freshmen in the SJA were on track to graduate during the same year. The whole class average for service hours was 11.5, but the SJA students averaged 20 hours. The pass rate for the Reading and Survey of Literature class among SJA freshmen was 90%; for all freshmen the rate was 76%. The SJA class at Kelvyn Park continues to embody the very best of urban service learning.

Other examples in Chicago demonstrate that service learning is a high-impact strategy with young people. In the Pilsen community, students at Juarez Community Academy spend the third quarter of their freshman language arts class exploring and volunteering in the community and then writing about the organizations they worked with, the issues they focused on, and the experiences they had. In small groups, students volunteer at a community agency

that addresses a social issue of interest to the students. The students complete writing assignments, gather them into a magazine that reflects the work of the community organization, and share the magazine with fellow students for review. Reading and writing assignments coupled with the production of a magazine that chronicles their volunteer experiences are fascinating ways for urban students to gain a deeper appreciation of their community and their role in it. The pass rate for the course went from 37% to 49% following the implementation of the service-learning project. Students were far more engaged in the curriculum that connected them with their community.

The Common Good

Service learning in an urban context is intimate. It is about responding to issues in the immediate community with an eye toward building the common good. Students can and should share in that common good. When properly facilitated in a city classroom, service-learning experiences enhance students' education in the following ways.

Extend academic learning to make it more personal, relevant, and meaningful. Service learning in urban contexts should help students work on social problems that are relevant to them. For example, students who learn about the Chicano civil rights movement and the work of Cesar Chavez then help deliver food to their community or teach younger students about Chavez. It is an important moment when young people begin to understand the curriculum's connection to their own culture and its political leaders.

Help students understand how classroom learning is linked to their communities. In large urban centers, students live in a wide range of social settings with various levels of diversity, wealth, and resources. Students tend to have a visceral understanding of the issues facing their immediate communities because they live them personally, but they often have a limited understanding of the organizational resources that are present. Quality service-learning projects foster a deeper understanding of the richness of their own community and how they can contribute to its development.



Top: Students reflect one of the most important outcomes of their service: hope.

Bottom: Chicago students take part in the Chavez Day of Reflection, a source of community pride.

In an American history class, students who are first- or second-generation immigrants can see how their study of immigration in America connects to an organization in their community that advocates for immigrant rights or provides mutual aid services to their parents.

Move students from a sense of powerlessness to a recognition of their personal power. It is easy for students to be overwhelmed by the problems facing their communities. Ask a typical urban teenager to name the top three or four problems facing their peers and you're likely to hear about gangs, substance abuse, violence, and teen pregnancy. The process of service learning helps students break those problems down, and they come to understand that they might not be able to change the whole world, but they can affect the lives of people in their communities. For example, the incidence of HIV and other STDs continues to escalate in many urban communities, so a health or biology class can develop a project by which students educate their peers about effective prevention strategies. Such action can lead students from despairing about the problem to feeling a sense of personal power that they can make a difference in the world.

Create a classroom that is socially engaging and builds relationships. Research demonstrates the importance of academically engaging classrooms accompanied by strong relationships (NASSP, 1996). In diverse urban classrooms, where positive relationships between students and teachers and among students are particularly important, service learning is a powerful tool to build relationships and make learning more engaging. As learning happens, relationships develop. During long-term projects, students and teachers plan, work, assess progress, and interact with one another in ways that are not possible in traditional classrooms.

Contextualize individual problems within broader social issues. In the United States, societal problems are typically individualized. If a family is hungry, the prevailing wisdom is that the family hasn't done enough. If a family has been evicted from its home, family members are reviled for not being wise enough to live within their means. A good service-



learning project helps students understand the pressing needs around them. It also reveals the larger forces at work that lead to such social problems as hunger and homelessness.

Students who may not always receive three nutritious meals each day don't understand that hunger is a sociopolitical problem that has policy dimensions. It is extraordinarily empowering for them to learn that they can help feed families and individuals and that such problems as hunger are not individualized problems, but social problems with political solutions.

Prepared for a Complex World

In Chicago each year, hundreds of teachers and tens of thousands of students participate in service-learning projects that enliven classrooms, contribute to communities, increase understanding, develop students' sense of personal power, and connect students in many ways. Service learning raises complex questions that often do not have tidy answers. My colleagues and I hope that our students emerge

from high school with the skills to explore and ask difficult questions and that they have confidence as they venture out into a complex and complicated world with a real commitment to the common good. **PL**

REFERENCES

- Billig, S. H. (2009). Does quality really matter? Testing the new K–12 service-learning standards for quality practice. In Moely, B., Billig, S., & Holland, B. (Eds.), *Creating our identities in service-learning and community engagement* (pp. 131–158). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Corporation for National and Service Learning. (2008). *Community Service and Service-Learning in America's Schools*. Retrieved from www.national-service.gov/pdf/08_1112_lsa_prevalence.pdf
- NASSP. (1996). *Breaking ranks: Changing an American institution*. Reston, VA: Author.

Jon Schmidt (jjschmidt@cps.k12.il.us) is the service learning manager for Chicago Public Schools.

Jerryelyn L. Jones is a chief area officer for Chicago Public Schools.

It is extraordinarily empowering for them to learn...that such problems as hunger are not individualized problems, but social problems with political solutions.