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USE RESEARCH KNOWLEDGE TO ADVANCE DISTRICT-WIDE SERVICE-LEARNING

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A growing body of research must inform our efforts to expand, improve, and sustain service-learning at the school district level. This third *District Lessons* provides basic information on how to apply the research on service-learning and on instructional reform to four fundamental aspects of increasing district sponsorship of service-learning: making the case accurately; ensuring high-quality practice; pursuing district-wide strategies; and applying existing tools to assess progress.

1. MAKE THE CASE ACCURATELY

In promoting district-level support for service-learning, advocates must cite research findings correctly. Studies from sites across the nation generally confirm that high-quality service-learning leads to academic, civic, and personal/social development benefits for students.

An accumulating body of research shows that service-learning can have an impact on students' higher order thinking skills, civic skills and dispositions, and individual development, as measured by standardized test scores and other assessments of learning. For example:

- In Michigan, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, and Vermont, students who engaged in high-quality service-

learning activities had higher scores in areas such as mathematics, English/language arts, and social studies relative to their peers who did not participate in service-learning.

- In Florida, Texas, and California, students who participated in high-quality service-learning activities showed greater civic skills and knowledge of social and political institutions than nonparticipating "matched" peers.
- In Philadelphia and rural Colorado, students who participated in high-quality service-learning projects were shown to have fewer risk factors, became more "pro-social," had greater internal "locus of control," and showed more attachment to school and community than nonparticipating peers.

2. ENSURE HIGH-QUALITY PRACTICE

District-level support for service-learning cannot be sustained unless the practice quality is high. Low-quality service-learning has little or no impact. Only high-quality service-learning experiences yield the kinds of student impacts that educators seek. According to recent studies, high-quality practice includes the following elements that enrich and deepen student learning.

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- **Teachers and students plan together to create service-learning projects that are tightly linked to multiple state standards.** Since tests measure mastery of standards, the service-learning curriculum must address the relevant local or state standards. Planners must be intentional about standards from the beginning. For example, high school students who build a playground for elementary school students are likely to learn about geometry, safety rules, and architecture, but they will not learn writing skills unless writing is specifically built into the service-learning project. In this case, lesson plans could include students writing letters to local architects to ask for help in developing the blueprints; developing a presentation for parents to showcase the design; reflecting on the challenges addressed; and providing advice for others.
- **Students have direct contact with the people they serve.** Many people learn better when the content has a “human face.” Relationships and dialogue promote greater understanding.
- **Reflection stimulates higher order thinking skills.** Reflection activities maximize learning when they foster students’ analytical and critical skills and help them understand different perspectives of a problem or issue.
- **Students have choices and decision-making authority during planning and implementation.** Students need to know that they have some control over their own learning activities, including determining the community issues to address and the potential problem-solving strategies. As much as possible, teachers should support students’ choices and help them develop ways to assess the relative merits of those choices. Students can then learn to work together to build consensus for their decisions. They can also reflect together on the consequences of their decisions for both the communities they serve and the participants involved in service.

3. PURSUE DISTRICT-WIDE STRATEGIES

Service-learning advocates can draw upon an expanding body of knowledge about getting started or sustaining the use of service-learning practice in a school district.

Getting Started with Service-Learning

- **Start small.** Educators who have adopted service-learning as a district-wide strategy have learned that success comes from taking small, critical steps from the bottom up and from the top down. Interested teachers and students can try service-learning on a small scale in a few classrooms, allowing them to learn from their successes and challenges. Meanwhile, service-learning supporters should build support among school and district leaders. These allies can be of great assistance to teachers and students and down the road will help in efforts to expand service-learning in the district.
- **Rely on teachers to spread the word and recruit other teachers.** Given their first-hand experience, teachers are some of the best advocates for service-learning. Peer-to-peer communication and mentoring can be influential, especially with teachers who value active learning strategies and are likely to find service-learning appealing.
- **Make results visible.** Demonstration and celebration are part of service-learning. Showcase service-learning projects publicly to help local stakeholders understand the results and their impact on the community, students, and teachers.

Sustaining Use of Service-Learning

- **Provide ongoing professional development.** Teachers need practical information about high-quality service-learning that models the varied possibilities for curricular connections and student benefits.
- **Establish network and dialogue groups.** Peer-to-peer relationships within and between schools are important for accelerating quality practice and troubleshooting. Within networks, practitioners can share successes and challenges. Networks also help retain momentum and bring new supporters and practitioners into the fold.

- **Measure outcomes.** To show that service-learning is worth the time and effort, it is important to measure its benefits. Measurement will also show where improvement is needed. Service-learning supporters can use the tools described in the fourth section, or they can do a more formal evaluation of outcomes. Either way, evaluation typically serves to improve practice by clarifying what good practice looks like and what effects are being achieved.
- **Recruit students as spokespeople.** Students can be highly effective marketers for service-learning. They are testimonials to its transformative power. Have students tell their stories to the media, the community, district administrators, the school board, elected officials, parents, and others who need to know more about service-learning.
- **Seek supportive policies and regular funding.** Practitioners need administrative support. Including service-learning in district policies, budgets, and vision statements sends a powerful message about priorities and provides support.

4. APPLY EXISTING TOOLS TO MEASURE PROGRESS

Careful use of existing assessment tools and resources can help improve and sustain service-learning practice. While increasing accountability, the information generated establishes a baseline for decisions about policy, professional development, funding, and staff.

Two online self-assessment tools and a database of other research tools are available to assist in measuring progress:

- **Service-Learning Quality and Sustainability Self-Assessment Measure** provides a way to document school district improvement over time. Based on research as well as advice from state-level coordinators

of service-learning, this tool allows the user to track service-learning quality and sustainability. It stores data for six data points, fall and spring of each year, and aggregates school-level data to the district level. District administrators can access the data at any time to review the overall district service-learning profile and assess areas of strengths and challenges. With this knowledge, education leaders can take steps to improve the practice of service-learning. (<http://www.slqualityindex.com>)

- **Service-Learning Quality Self-Assessment Tool** provides a self-assessment on quality indicators related to the Essential Elements of Service-Learning developed by service-learning experts in the 1990s. Challenges revealed as a result of the self-assessment can be addressed by clicking on the “challenges” bar. Research syntheses, web-based resources, and sites where practitioners have met the challenges are summarized. (<http://www.servicelearningtool.com>)
- **Compendium of Research and Assessment Tools (CART)** provides descriptions of over 500 measures of service-learning outcomes including self-efficacy, service-learning quality, civic engagement, pro-social behaviors, and other areas. CART includes 100 downloadable instruments and contact information to access other instruments. (<http://cart.rmcdenver.com>)

CONCLUSION

Expanding, improving, and sustaining service-learning in school districts takes time and dedication. Fortunately, service-learning supporters can rely on a strong body of research that draws from classrooms, schools, and districts across the country. By carefully applying these research lessons and utilizing existing tools, examples, and resources, supporters can ensure the success of their efforts to institutionalize service-learning.

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For more information on the National Service-Learning Partnership, visit <http://www.service-learningpartnership.org>.