What Is Service Learning?

National youth leadership council
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https://nylc.org/service-learning/

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Service-learning is an approach to teaching and learning in which students use academic knowledge and skills to address genuine community needs.

Picking up trash on a river bank is *service*.

Studying water samples under a microscope is *learning*.

When science students collect and analyze water samples, document their results, and present findings to a local pollution control agency – that is ***service-learning***.

What makes it work?

Successful service-learning is a multifaceted teaching and learning process. Though each service-learning project is uniquely tailored to meet specific learning goals and community needs, several elements are critical for success. These elements are the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice.

Go deeper with the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice.

How do I use it?

Service-learning is an incredibly flexible tool, easily adapted to different age levels, community needs, and curricular goals. Projects can engage entire schools over an academic year, or involve a small group for a short period of time.

Elementary School

Fifth-graders tutored younger students in reading over the course of a school year. The project improved language skills for both younger and older students and helped the tutors develop their organizational and leadership skills.

Middle School

A middle school science class studying pollution and disease worked with Environmental Protection to learn about the dangers of radon and how to test for it in homes. To educate the community on hazards, testing, and cleanup, students created an infomercial to share with local schools and community groups.

High School

Tackling discrimination against HIV-positive people, tenth-graders wrote skits that drew parallels between the treatment of people living with AIDS and racial discrimination. They built sets, made costumes and programs, and performed their work for the community. Proceeds supported a local AIDS hospice.

Successful service-learning projects are tied closely to specific learning objectives, and many of the best are tied to numerous areas of study. For example, when seventh- and eighth-graders studied the historical significance of a local river, they developed projects to build nature trails, test water samples, document contamination of the local habitat, and restore historical sites. Their teachers connected those activities to their studies in earth science, mathematics, language arts, physical education, music, visual arts, and social studies. These connections not only deepened the impact projects had on learning, but also provided the young people with a broader understanding of how different subjects are interrelated. These connections are best made by identifying specific learning goals and developing a project that meets them. Through a student-centered inquiry model known as IPARD – an acronym for Investigation, Planning and Preparation, Action, Reflection, and Demonstration – this process is broken down into a step-by-step framework.

How can I implement service-learning in my school or community-based organization?

Successful service-learning relies on trained practitioners, and NYLC can help you gain the skills you need. It only takes a couple of days to get a firm grounding in the fundamentals, and ongoing training is available on advanced topics. NYLC provides custom training opportunities for schools and community-based organizations.

Learn more about NYLC's professional services.

Where can I meet others who are involved in service-learning?

Find like-minded service-learners online or in person. The Generator School Network is a community of youth and adults committed to service-learning, coming together in an online space. Browse user-created projects, share your own work, and participate in discussions and groups related to topics of interest to you. The National Service-Learning Conference is a gathering of over 1,400 youth and adults engaged in service, learning, and youth development, focusing on current and emerging issues, best practices, and the challenges facing us today.

Where can I find service-learning publications?

NYLC and other service-learning organizations offer many helpful publications. Visit the Generator School Network for access to publications and videos designed by NYLC to turn service-learning research into practice. The GSN is also home to the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, which offers thousands of free online resources for K-12, higher education, community-based organizations, and tribal communities, and is the nation's largest library of service-learning research, data, tools, and materials.