



Service-Learning Research and Practice

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## DEAR READERS

Ensuring that service is meaningful is not only about meeting local needs; it is also central to helping young people successfully transition to adulthood. As I said in a recent lecture for the Peace Corps, while our globe has shrunk due to technology and other advances, it is



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growing tremendously in numbers of youth. Close to half of the world's population is below the age of 25; 88 percent live in developing countries.

This "wave" of young people is a tremendous resource for any country, and service-learning can help address the attendant education and work demands of this population boom. Fortunately, it is a strategy the Obama administration also recognizes.

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# Service-Learning and Obama's Agenda

President Barack Obama calls for the expansion of service-learning in the nation's schools in his education platform.

With reauthorizations of the National and Community Service Act and the No Child Left Behind Act due during the congressional session beginning this month, NYLC suggests changes to strengthen the role of service-learning in the nation's schools and communities.

NYLC proposes broad enhancements to the reauthorization of the Learn and Serve provision of the NCSA, the federal bill that oversees service-learning initiatives. Adding the learning dimension to school-based service is our key goal. Defining "high-quality service-learning" in the federal bill can ensure that the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice inform classroom practice and school-based service-learning curricula. These eight standards, written under the leadership of NYLC, have been adopted by service-learning organizations, states, and schools nationwide — most recently by the Peace Corps.

Two other factors critical to the reauthorization of these bills include ensuring that high-quality professional development and service-learning curricula are available to educators and are an allowable use of federal funds. Tying the goals of the NCSA to NCLB is paramount to achieving the president's education goals. NYLC will work in tandem with Congress and the administration to

ensure students, teachers, school leaders, and community activists strive to create schools and communities where students are eager to engage, learn, and lead.

Obama's renewed interest in service and service-learning recalls John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech when he said "Ask not what your county can do for you; ask what you can do for your county." It also builds on the foundation laid by former Minnesota Senators David Durenberger (R) and Paul Wellstone (D), both of whom were instrumental in the development and advancement of NCSA.

As dedicated public servants, these elected officials not only spearheaded national legislation supporting service-learning, but also practiced their commitment to meaningful service — the theme of this issue of *The Generator*. They addressed issues that are personally relevant, provide interesting and engaging activities, and result in attainable and visible outcomes that are still valued by those being served — all indicators of the meaningful service standard and critical aspects of any effective service-learning experience.

For a copy of Obama's entire service platform go to [www.barackobama.com/issues/service](http://www.barackobama.com/issues/service).

For a copy of NYLC's policy recommendations 2009-2010, go to [www.nylc.org/policy](http://www.nylc.org/policy). ■



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# Meaningful Service

Service-learning actively engages participants in meaningful and personally relevant service activities.

For a complete copy of the *K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice*, and their corresponding indicators, visit [www.nylc.org/standards](http://www.nylc.org/standards)

## K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice

- **Meaningful Service**
- Link to Curriculum
- Reflection
- Diversity
- Youth Voice
- Partnerships
- Progress Monitoring
- Duration and Intensity

## Meaningful Service Indicators

1. Service-learning experiences are appropriate to participant ages and developmental abilities.
2. Service-learning addresses issues that are personally relevant to the participants.
3. Service-learning provides participants with interesting and engaging service activities.
4. Service-learning encourages participants to understand their service experiences in the context of the underlying societal issues being addressed.
5. Service-learning leads to attainable and visible outcomes that are valued by those being served.

### RESEARCH

## Creating Meaning, Addressing Needs

Research suggests that meaningful service perhaps is the most important of the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice.

It might be obvious that any valuable service-learning experience should be meaningful — yet it is far from self-evident what the term “meaningful” implies. But the substantial positive impact meaningful service can have on students’ academic, civic, and developmental outcomes (Neal, Leeper, and Root 2009) calls for an examination of the ingredients required to reach true meaning.

Though meaningful service implies service that is perceived as beneficial to its recipients and to the larger community, this article will focus on the importance of meaningfulness as defined by the service providers.

### Challenges

A number of factors have to be in place for a service-learning experience to be perceived as meaningful by students, i.e., the providers of the service. The first dimension relates to the way the experience allows for personal growth. Yates (1995) noted that opportunities to take on adult responsibilities and receive respect for doing work well “may lead [students] to think about who they are and who they can be.” Furco (2002) found that the students who were most strongly influenced by their service experiences were engaged in meaningful service activities that challenged them to some degree or ones in which they had responsibility and interest. The students’ sense of engagement was

enhanced when they felt they were treated with respect by members of the community. To reach such outcomes, the service experience must be developmentally appropriate — that is, it must deal with an issue that can be understood by learners, and they must be reasonably well able to perform the corresponding service activity.

A second dimension relates to how students perceive their relationship with recipients of the service they provide. Root and Billig (2008) affirmed that students found meaning in their service when they interacted with individuals faced with personal difficulties, confronting examples of injustice, or encountering inefficient policies. Direct contact “enabled [students] to connect to larger issues, both in the community and more generally in society.”

### Reconnecting Youth and Community

A third dimension relates to how the service experience changes the way students see themselves in the community or the wider society. While a number of studies have established that many young people feel disconnected from their communities and



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might have an egocentric way of viewing the world, effective service activities engage students emotionally with their communities (Root and Billig 2008). Catalano and colleagues (2004) showed that participation in communities helped students

develop stronger connections to the community norms and values, thereby contributing to community cohesion.

### Local Action, Global Meaning

While a meaningful project can have a lasting impact on students as well as recipients, it has the potential to serve an even higher purpose if it is firmly placed in its appropriate wider context. Students should be encouraged to analyze how the need they are addressing is but one step toward a broader vision of tackling the problem on the local, national, and global levels.

Thus service-learning projects that adhere to the standards help develop civic awareness and democratic citizenship (Root and Billig 2008). Through learning and reflection, students are capable of comparing their life situations to those of the people they serve and to place any need or problem in local and global contexts. Once students start to consider the possibility of changing social problems, they realize the importance of the learning component. It takes service to meet needs, but knowledge and skills to end them. ■

FOR REFERENCES, SEE PAGE 4

# Beyond Canned Food Drives

Learning gardening was just the first step for these Belfast, Maine, students. Working with local partners they now offer a range of meaningful services to their community.



With the holidays come renewed food awareness — especially this year, as food crises go global.

Science writer Michael Pollan has called for a Farmer in Chief position in the Obama administration. Food pioneer Alice Waters considers lunch a mandatory part of “edible education” in her school garden programs. And teachers like Steven Tanguay and Jon Thurston of Troy Howard Middle School in Belfast, Maine, are helping students do more than collect canned food for families in need during the holidays. Their Garden Project students are growing their own nutrient-rich produce for local food shelves — the result of a year-round gardening curriculum that began in 2001.

These services benefit not only local food shelves, but also their classmates and larger community through daily deliveries to the school cafeteria, a student-run farm stand, and the local food co-op. As student Ashley Greene says, “What we do is important.”

For the 90 or so students involved, the proof is in the produce. On little more than an acre, last year the students grew more than three tons of vegetables. Altogether they harvested more than 100 varieties of produce and taught nearly 700 younger students the

marvels of gardening.

As the garden became more productive, Tanguay says that the students were challenged to “expand their donations in direct proportion to the gardens’ and greenhouses’ total yield throughout the year.” He credits elementary students, who wanted to share the bounty of their fall harvest with those who most needed it, with identifying the food shelves as a community need.

Aware that their produce could affect other producers, “Students talked with local growers to determine what niche they could best fill with their own product,” says Tanguay. The students found that local farmers were not growing greens in the winter, so they researched and built three round, portable “hoop houses,” small greenhouses that produce greens year-round without artificial heat.



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In addition to understanding the physics of greenhouse temperature control, students experience ecology and learn organic chemistry through soil composition, math through monitoring and graphing the greenhouse

temperatures, and language arts through their production of their e-newsletter, “The Weekly Worm.” They come to understand why pricing their produce wholesale makes sense for the school-based lunch programs, and why they can afford to charge more at the local co-op. They even learn state history by studying the habits of loggers and Wabanaki Indians who, like the students, grew beans they then cooked in the ground overnight seasoned with maple syrup and venison for community bean-hole suppers.

What began as a land preservation project — the garden saved land from becoming a bus parking lot — now includes a non-genetically-modified seed business, a vegetable stand, a watershed project, and a pizza business.

And among the unintended benefits of the garden project is a marked decrease in behavioral issues, a natural “safe zone” for students including wheelchair accessibility.

Tanguay says he relies on student ingenuity to “leave the garden better than you found it” each year. Clearly, the Garden Project students are also leaving the world better.

For more information, go to [www.schoolgardenproject.com](http://www.schoolgardenproject.com). ■



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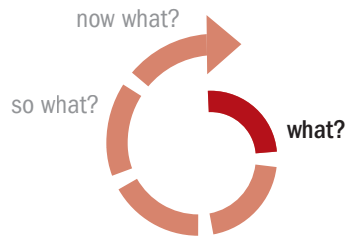
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The Service-Learning Cycle

### The First Step in Meaningful Service

Helping students assess community needs is an important first step in the service-learning cycle — one that sets the stage for the meaningful service standard and for genuine youth leadership. Done effectively, this assessment can make the experience “personally relevant to the participants” and “lead to attainable and visible outcomes that are valued by those being served” — key indicators for the standard.

With this Teacher Tool, we insert ourselves at two critical points in the service-learning cycle, both at the initial “What?” stage and at the end of the initial experience, when participants ask themselves, “Now what?” (See the back of this Teacher Tool for a further explanation of this later phase.) Just as there are multiple strategies for reflecting, there are multiple ways to approach these steps in the cycle. Perhaps most critical is that young people begin to see their personal interests and potential roles in the larger community.

The lists to the right provide some possible starting points. Visit [www.nylc.org](http://www.nylc.org) for more resources.

## What? Assessing Community Needs

**Standard:** *Service-learning actively engages participants in meaningful and personally relevant service activities.*

### Initial Ways to Assess Community Needs

Conduct a neighborhood assessment, or “walkabout,” listing observable assets and needs in a defined area (the school yard, a single block or multiple-block area).

Interview school board members or community council members.

Survey classmates and teachers.

Invite community agencies to a “service fair” held at the school; students can then hear a variety of agency perspectives.

Convene a “Gathering of Elders” to assess persistent needs observed over longer lifespans.

Map social assets such as different cultures, ethnicities, and age groups.

Review headlines in the local paper.

Compare local headlines to national and international headlines in papers of record such as the New York Times or Washington Post to find issues of local and global importance.

Explore the feasibility of using Google Earth, GPS, a web solution or other technology-based approaches to discover, address, or communicate needs.

### Initial Personal Questions to Consider

Whose community is this?

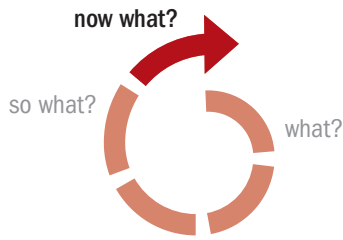
What is my relationship to this community?

What do I really care about in this community?

What are my obligations to this community?

How do I or can I meet those obligations?

Who else might be able to help me meet those obligations?



The Service-Learning Cycle

## Now What? Going Deeper with Meaningful Service

The celebration of a completed service-learning project, accompanied by reflection activities, marks a full turn of the service-learning cycle. This is when participants are primed for further exploration and can begin to make connections from the outcomes of their initial projects to related issues. Most importantly, this phase can lead to the identification of the root causes behind the issues — and ultimately to steps toward more sustainable change. At this stage, participants “understand their service experiences in the context of the underlying societal issues being addressed,” one of the meaningful service standard indicators.

As service-learning participants become more knowledgeable about the issues, they also discover more about their own levels of engagement. The questions listed under “Now What?” should help students channel their new understandings into continued action.

Service-Learning Projects				
Food Collection	Tutoring	Teaching Computer Skills to Seniors	Community Garden	Water Quality Monitoring
Related Issues				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• malnutrition</li><li>• obesity</li><li>• school lunches</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• achievement gap</li><li>• ELL</li><li>• learning differences</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• isolation</li><li>• access</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• small-scale farming vs. agribusiness</li><li>• deforestation</li><li>• biodiversity</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• pollution</li><li>• lack of access to clean water</li><li>• air quality</li><li>• emissions trading</li></ul>
Root Causes				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• poverty</li><li>• ignorance</li><li>• fast food marketing</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• unequal access to education resources</li><li>• ineffective education policy</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• grouping of seniors into single-age resident communities</li><li>• access to technology</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• global food market</li><li>• regulatory issues</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• regulatory issues</li></ul>
Now What?				
<b>1.</b> Where are we on the continuum of understanding related issues and root causes? <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Unaware that the problem exists.</li><li>• Aware but not acting to impact the problem.</li><li>• Directly impacting the problem.</li><li>• Have decision-making power or influence over the problem.</li><li>• Aware and active in trying to impact the problem.</li></ul>		<b>2.</b> Who has more knowledge, self-interest, power, and connections to the issue that we are interested in?		
<b>3.</b> Researching issues > understanding policies > taking action				