

Youth Service California

Service-Learning: A Strategy for Success in Afterschool

Service-learning, a powerful teaching strategy that involves students in meaningful service to the community that is intentionally integrated with academic and developmental learning goals, has proven to bring about rich developmental outcomes that keep youth engaged in learning and in life.

When voters passed Proposition 49 in 2002, they proved that California communities are deeply concerned about how youth spend their time during the afterschool hours. The impending rollout of 550 million public dollars to support afterschool activities has intensified attention towards appropriate learning outcomes for the students participating in those programs. The current environment has also amplified the need for inventive teaching strategies and creative activities that will result in both improved academic performance and increases in youth developmental assets.

For the past six years, Youth Service California has facilitated service-learning activity development at various afterschool programs across the state. As the growing body of research on impacts in the school setting continues to show that students who participate in high quality service-learning increase in areas of academic learning, resiliency, prosocial behaviors and civic engagement, (Billig, 2002) service-learning is increasingly being used in schools as a teaching strategy. Youth Service California has been and continues to be committed to bringing this knowledge and related strategies and resources to the afterschool field.

Successful Afterschool Programs

The highly regarded National Research Council report (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*,

indicates seven key components of successful afterschool programs:

- Physical and psychological safety
- Appropriate structure
- Supportive relationships
- Opportunities to belong
- Positive social norms
- Support for efficacy and mattering
- Opportunities for skill building

When programs have these seven components in place, student participants develop in four areas:

- Physical (e.g., good health habits, avoiding risks)
- Intellectual (e.g., life skills, school success)
- Psychological and emotional (e.g., coping skills, self-efficacy, responsibility, pro-social values and behaviors)

Other studies of youth development are aligned with these conclusions (McLaughlin, M., Irby, M. and Langman, J., 1994; Bernard, B., 2004; Ordonez-Jasis and Jasis, 2004; Warren, Feist, Nevarez, 2002).

The Service-Learning Connection

By leading students through a process of planning, action and reflection, service-learning helps to facilitate the existence of the seven key components for afterschool programs identified by the NRC study.

continued

For example, service-learning:

- Gives students a voice and responsibility in decision making.
- Develops caring relationships between peers and adults as they work together toward a common goal.
- Increases school success by applying academic skills and experiences to complex real life needs and situations.
- Promotes positive involvement in, and understanding of the community. (Billig, 2002).

Using the resiliency California Healthy Kids Survey, (WestEd, 2006) Youth Service California's evaluation of its work with afterschool programs shows that students who engaged in service-learning activities as part of their afterschool programs reported finding strong emotional and external supports at their afterschool sites. They also reported feelings of empathy, self-efficacy, and hope for the future at levels equal to or above norms for students enrolled in California public schools (McCarthy, 2006).

Including high quality service-learning in an afterschool program ensures that afterschool activities are tied to academics, focus on important life skills, and help participants address real-life issues situated in their communities. In addition, high quality service-learning allows students to interact with trusted adults in their program and in

their community, building relationships which provide emotional supports not always available in participants' everyday environment. Service-learning situated in the afterschool environment is a powerful model for program providers which can strengthen participants' developmental assets and help them make healthy choices for their future.

References

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