

Research demonstrates that high-quality service-learning has positive effects on K-12 students' academic performance and school engagement. Many of the service-learning initiatives included in these studies evaluated federally funded Learn and Serve America programs. See below for a summary of the most significant findings supporting service-learning.

National Studies on Service-Learning and Academic Achievement

- Students who are more civically engaged perform better in reading, mathematics, history, and science, and are more apt to complete high school. Those who participated in service-learning made significantly greater gains in all four subject areas than those who did not participate. Davila and Mora (2007) analyzed data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988.
- Eighty-one percent of dropouts felt that they would have been more apt to stay in school if their school had offered real-world learning opportunities, such as service-learning. Bridgeland and colleagues (2006) conducted focus groups and interviews with high school dropouts, ages 16-24, to determine reasons they left school and factors that might have led them to persist.
- Low socio-economic status students who participate in service scored higher in achievement, motivation, grades, bonding to school, and attendance than similar students who did not participate in service. Scales and colleagues (2006) studied the effects of taking part in service-learning or community service on the academic assets of a large national sample of sixth- through twelfth-grade students.
- In a national evaluation of high-quality middle and high school federally funded Learn and Serve programs, Melchior (1998) found that at the end of one year, service-learning students significantly outperformed comparison students in overall grades, grades in mathematics and science, and school engagement. Participating high school students demonstrated significantly greater improvement in mathematics, science, and school engagement and had significantly fewer failures than the comparison group. Middle school students demonstrated significantly greater gains in social studies grades than comparison students. Short-term academic benefits were more pronounced for minority students; minority and disadvantaged students showed significantly greater long-term academic benefits than others.
- When comparing academic performance of students in alternative high schools offering the Quest Skills for Action curriculum, which includes a service-learning component, with the performance of similar students in traditional schools, alternative school students had approximately half the absences, posted significantly fewer suspensions, and earned significantly higher grades (Laird & Black, 2002).

Statewide Research Results on Service-Learning

- Researchers at RMC Research Corporation (Meyer, Billig, & Hofschire, 2004) studied the effects of Michigan Learn and Serve federally funded programs on students' performance on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program and school engagement. Overall, service-learning students had significantly higher science and social studies MEAP scores than comparison students. Service-learning students in grades 7-12 reported more cognitive engagement in English/language arts than others. For students in grades 2-5, service-learning was linked to greater behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement in school.
- Surveys of Learn and Serve America participants in Wisconsin found that approximately 98 percent of teachers who offered service-learning said that students learned more than what they would have learned through regular instruction. Almost half (46 percent) reported that students' grades had improved, while 42 percent reported a decrease in disciplinary referrals and 36 percent a decline in absenteeism during service-learning (Potts, Kirkham, Monsour, Grinde, & Planner, 2001).
- A quasi-experimental study of 15 elementary, middle, and high school classrooms that were part of the CalServe initiative, a federally funded program found that students in 6 of the 12 classes showed "moderate to large" gains in language arts or reading achievement, school engagement, sense of educational competence, completion of homework, and educational goals (Weiler, LaGoy, Crane, & Rainer, 1998).
- On a statewide survey of federally funded Learn and Serve schools in Florida (Follman & Muldoon, 1997), 74 percent of reporting schools indicated that student grades had improved, 68 percent reported a decline in disciplinary referrals, and 62 percent noted decreased absences. Impacts on academic outcomes were even more positive in schools with high percentages of at-risk students.

The Importance of High-Quality Service-Learning

Many studies emphasize that the quality of service-learning is an important predictor of its impacts on academic outcomes, including students' attachment to school, school engagement, and motivation to learn (Billig & Sandel, 2003; Scales, Blyth, Berkas, & Kielsmeier, 2000; Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005).

Individual elements of quality service-learning have been linked to academic outcomes. For example, students who participate in more meaningful service-learning (including interaction with the community, valued service activities, and relevance to students) are more apt to attain high grades, stay engaged in school, and remain committed to class work than others (Scales, Blyth, Berkas, & Kielsmeier, 2000; Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005; Meyer, Billig, & Hofschire, 2004). Service experiences integrated with the curriculum are linked to greater gains in subject matter knowledge, understanding the relevance of school learning, and overall academic performance (Dewsbury-White, 1993; Furco, 2002; Root, Rau, & Larson, n.d.). Longer service-learning experiences yield greater academic benefits (Scales et al., 2000; Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005), as do those that include substantial opportunities for reflection (Scales et al., 2000).

The National Youth Leadership Council led the nationwide effort to compile the evidence-based K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice, published in 2008. For a copy of the eight standards and the indicators, visit www.nylc.org/standards.



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