

INTRODUCTION

Service Learning and the Florida Sunshine State Standards

In the 1990s, the Florida Department of Education (FLDoE) and other state education agencies established and adopted education standards to cover major curricular areas in K-12 public education. Florida's standards are linked with statewide assessments in reading, writing, mathematics, and science. The statewide assessment, termed the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test, or FCAT, is a primary tool used to evaluate student and school performance. Student promotion and graduation are based partly on FCAT scores. In addition, schools receive a grade each year, from A-F, based on their students' FCAT performance and other weighted factors.

During this same period, the FLDoE and most other state education agencies also began promoting and providing support for service-learning projects. Since 1992, the FLDoE has awarded approximately \$18 million to support 3,000 service-learning projects involving over 500,000 students. Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy in which students design, conduct, reflect, demonstrate/present on, and celebrate service activities that apply and are a means of learning. In service learning, students practice the skills and behaviors they themselves need to know via hands-on activities that meet real needs.

Because of the FCAT's importance in Florida, and its linkage with the Sunshine State Standards, most teachers who engage their students in service learning also align their projects with the standards. The hands-on and practical approaches used in service-learning projects, and the projects' typical encompassing of many disciplines, means that service learning is an excellent tool for meeting standards across multiple grade levels and subjects.

The knowledge, skills, and abilities that students gain through service learning correlate directly with the Sunshine State Standards. Every service-learning project is unique and addresses a different set of standards by subject and grade level. At the same time, however, effective and comprehensive projects—i.e., those that incorporate all the elements of service learning—address a rich array of content and process standards.

Why Utilize Service Learning in General, and Specifically to Address Standards?

When, for example . . .

- students who need help with reading or math serve as tutors to younger students in those subjects,
- Spanish classes assist migrant and immigrant families who do not speak English,
- technology classes teach seniors how to use computers and the Internet,
- teen mothers teach younger girls about the difficulties and pitfalls of teen parenthood,
- history classes conduct research, oral histories, and restoration efforts in their communities,
- students with discipline problems help other students resolve conflict,
- leadership or dropout prevention classes are assigned to help other teachers organize classroom service-learning projects, or
- science classes monitor and educate others about endangered plant and animal species,

. . . the students receive at least as much as they give. A rising tide of research shows that students involved in service learning attend school more, perform better, get into trouble less often, are better able to relate to diverse groups, have greater social responsibility, are more motivated, and are more knowledgeable about careers (Billig, 2000, "Impacts of Service-Learning on Youth . . . 1990-1999").

Elements of Effective Service Learning

What distinguishes service learning from other service and volunteering? In a school context, the service is directly related to academic curricula. Activities are designed to address/apply specific learning objectives, standards, and curriculum frameworks. Well-designed service-learning projects have the following elements, which are performed/led by students with teacher/adult facilitation.

1. Preparation/Planning/Design

- Needs identification/assessment
- Understanding the context for the need(s) to be addressed
- Issue discussion and selection
- Examination of players, policies, and systems impacting need(s)
- Project design

Teachers assign students tasks/work/projects to learn about the context for the service the students will subsequently provide. The service activities that follow are derived from this new knowledge, involve student voice and design, but remain within the curricular framework the teacher has established.

2. Action

- Research- and knowledge-based service activities
- Student leadership in conducting and leading the project
- Fluid activities and evolution of projects
- Collaborative work with service recipients and partners
- Application of multiple learning styles including individual work, teamwork, use of technology, tactile/manual work, oral presentations, data collection, construction, etc.

3. Reflection is integrated into successful projects from beginning to end, as students form and test opinions, project outcomes, measure results and impacts, discuss actions and reactions, and make improvements and future plans. Reflection allows students to process and absorb what they have experienced and is critical to meaningful learning. Reflective activities include:

- Journaling;
- Projecting project impacts;
- Discussion;
- Conducting formative and summative evaluation of activities as well as of impacts on those serving (i.e., self-evaluation/assessment) and those served;
- Making project refinements; and/or future planning.

4. Demonstration involves students in “showing what they have learned” by educating others about the issues they are addressing via service. Demonstration takes various forms—some of which are actual service-learning projects in themselves—including the following:

- Advocacy campaigns,
- Putting on public forums and presentations,
- Performance on the issues addressed in the project,
- Teaching others about the project and the issues behind it through lessons or presentations, and
- Creating films, portfolios, books, web sites, publications, works of art, etc., to represent the project and the needs it is addressing.

5. Recognition/Celebration

Throughout the project but especially at the end, students should be recognized for their efforts. In successful projects, all participants join together to reflect on successes and failures and plan future efforts.

When all or many of these elements are in place, the impacts of curriculum-based service learning go far beyond those of traditional community service and volunteering. Service learning combines academic and affective learning to engage students, hands-on, in the real world. This combination is what makes service learning such a powerful tool, pedagogy, and strategy.

Support for Service Learning in Florida—Florida Learn & Serve

In Florida, service learning is supported through funds from the Corporation for National and Community Service as part of the Learn & Serve America program. Florida Learn & Serve awards grants to schools and school districts to engage students in service-learning activities. Each year, the approximately \$1 million awarded supports about 90 large (average of 200 students) projects, 150 mini-grants, and participation by 500,000 students. Every Florida school district has participated.

The primary selection criterion for Learn & Serve awards is the overall quality of the project as presented in its proposal. Priority is given to proposals that

- involve disadvantaged youth and diverse groups of youth,
- involve youth in administering the project,
- are interdisciplinary or involve multiple age groups,
- are part of the established curriculum, and/or
- help meet education, environmental, public safety, and other human needs.

Match or in-kind funds and partnerships are required for consideration for Florida Learn & Serve grants.

The bulk of Florida Learn & Serve funds are used to provide materials for service projects, transportation to service sites, and for coordinator release time/substitute teachers. In general, grant funds can be used to prepare for, travel to, engage in, reflect upon, disseminate information about, and celebrate service-learning efforts. Grant funds cannot be used to create positions, pay student stipends, cover indirect costs, or pay for trips other than to prepare for or conduct service.

In addition to Florida Learn & Serve, the FDOE supports service-learning links between K-12 and college students through the Community/Higher Education/School Partnership (CHESP). CHESP engages K-12 and college students in joint service-learning projects and also supports the integration of service learning into teacher education programs. A companion VISTA project places VISTAs at 20 K-12 and higher education institutions statewide to expand student service-learning efforts.

The Florida Safety Preparedness and Response Coalition (SPARC) expands K-12 service learning for Homeland Security in which students plan and implement service-learning activities that address issues such as disaster preparation, senior safety, and school and community safety. A corporate partnership with State Farm Insurances provides funds to engage students in activities that improve home safety in times of disaster.

Linking Service Learning and Standards—Four Practical Resources

Florida Learn & Serve compiled information showing linkages between service learning and the Sunshine State Standards. Local practitioners and trainers examined existing documents from Kentucky, Wisconsin, South Carolina, and Vermont, and made recommendations for a product that encompassed four key areas:

1. Detailed profiles of effective service-learning projects across subjects and grade levels, with lists of the key standards that those projects addressed,
2. A listing of the standards, with service-learning examples that address those standards,
3. A table listing the standards, the elements of service learning, and identification of which elements correlate to each standard, and
4. Examples of service-learning lesson plans—from multiple grades and subjects as well as types of activities—and the standards those plans/activities address.

In making their recommendations, practitioners noted that each set of information had value, and that a range of information sets would have the widest applicability. The products are available in a published form and also on the Florida Learn & Serve web site with free access and download. Training and technical assistance sessions are held around the state on using the materials, and the information will be updated and expanded over time.

For More Information

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