

Service-Learning: A Context for Parent and Family Involvement

Marybeth Neal, Ph.D.
NYLC

Cathryn Kaye
Service-Learning Consultant

As a model of community development, service-learning offers a rich context for parent, family, and community involvement strategies.¹

The field of parent and family involvement shares with service-learning the goal of student academic achievement through the building of "social capital," the shared values that connect humans to one another. Research and best practices from each field can enhance the other. In this article we explore the premise that these two fields have much to offer one another.

Introduction

The potential of service-learning to create opportunities for positive connections between individuals and institutions and across cultures and generations is remarkable. Beyond the abundance of anecdotal evidence, the *Growing to Greatness 2004* survey of U.S. public school principals who use service-learning reports that service-learning has a "somewhat" to "very positive" impact upon parent and family involvement (71 percent) and

school community relationships (91 percent) (Kielsmeier et al., 23).

Following are some examples of parent and family involvement in service-learning from fieldwork in Minnesota that illustrate the inherent intergenerational possibilities.

- A teenage mother brings her own mother to her service-learning site to care for her young child. The grandmother, who never finished high school, becomes involved in the community of teachers and students involved in the project. The grandmother learns to trust the school staff in a way she had never been able to before. She then returns to school to complete her high school diploma (Neal 1999).
- A high school boy who, years ago, fled to the United States with his mother from war-torn East Africa, now organizes activities for elementary students. The children look up to him as a mentor, and he has a growing sense of what it means to be an adult caretaker. The experience helps him realize how challenging he has made life for his own mother, and helps him

appreciate how much his mother does for him. He reports that his relationship with his mother has greatly improved as a result (Harris 2005).

- In an affluent western suburb of Minneapolis, high school students taking a leadership class must each implement their own service-learning projects as a way to practice leadership. During a discussion of how to raise funds to pay for the materials they need, they become aware of their connections to resources through the social networks of their parents: their parents' friends, work colleagues, and relatives. As they approach these adults, they begin the process of interacting with them as young adults themselves. Service-learning helps them understand their roles as members of an adult social network (Neal 1999).

In this next section we compare the parent/family involvement and service-learning fields in terms of their historical origins, similarities in research and effective practices.

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Parallel Histories

The parent/family involvement field, like service-learning, can trace its development to the early 20th century. For service-learning, much tracks back to the progressive education espoused by John Dewey. For parent/family involvement it is with the founding of the first Parent Teacher Association in 1897.

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Parent involvement, like service-learning, had a source of federal funding beginning in 1994 (as part of Title I, the first section of the Improving America's Schools Act of

1994, Public Law 103-382). Under this law, and continuing with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, school districts receiving more than \$500,000 in Title I funding must support parent involvement with 1 percent of the funds.² For service-learning, federal funding began with passage of the National and Community Service Act of 1993.

Parallel Research

The two fields also share similar challenges in research: a lack of longitudinal studies and variability in program implementation. A. T. Henderson and K. L. Mapp analyzed 51 high-quality studies of the impact of family and community upon academic achievement. They found that students with involved parents, regardless of socioeconomic status, were more likely to:

- earn higher grades, test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs;
- be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits;
- attend school regularly;
- have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school;
- graduate and go on to post-secondary education (Henderson and Mapp 2002, 7).

Furthermore, they found community connections also play an

important role in schools' success and support. Community organizing, which they define as a "type of engagement based outside schools and led by parents and community members" contributes to positive changes for schools, particularly when focused on building low-income families' power and political skills to hold schools accountable for results. In reviewing studies of community organizing, Henderson and Mapp found the following impacts, which may have implications for the special utility of community-based service-learning:

- upgraded school facilities
- improved school leadership and staffing
- higher-quality learning programs for students
- new resources and programs to improve teaching and curriculum
- new funding for after-school programs and family supports (Henderson and Mapp 2002, 8)

Common Essential Elements for Effective Practice

Both fields have identified effective practices as a way to promote quality of implementation. In service-learning, there are the Essential Elements of Effective Service-Learning Practice (pre-

sented in *Growing to Greatness 2004*), among others. In parent/family involvement there are several sources. Following are excerpts from those sources that involve connecting with the community, where the potential for intersection with service-learning is greatest.

The 2002 review and synthesis by Henderson and Mapp suggest effective practices that relate to addressing community needs in partnership with community members.

- Programs that successfully connect with families and community invite involvement are welcoming, and address specific parent and community needs.
- Effective programs to engage families and community embrace a philosophy of partnership. The responsibility for children's educational development is a collaborative enterprise among parents, school staff, and community members (46-52).

As with service-learning, parent involvement through community projects is recommended throughout the field's literature. This practice has been advanced through research conducted at Johns Hopkins University on the schools belonging to the Network of Partnership Schools. In Joyce Epstein's six recommendations for parental involvement (1995), she includes family participation in the community, and volunteering:³

- Encourage parent volunteering at the school and participation in school activities. (Make parents aware of chances to volunteer at the school.)
- Support families by collaborating with the community to bring families needed resources and to increase family participation in the community. (Provide information on community services to help the child or family.) (Vaden-Kiernan 2005).

Suzanne Carter's analysis of parent and family involvement research also emphasizes the importance of partnerships that involve community organizations: "The most promising opportunity for student achievement occurs when families, schools and community organizations work together" (Carter 2002, 4).

Parent and Family Involvement

Service-learning facilitates many opportunities to develop sustained parental engagement — particularly in middle and high schools where parents often assume they are no longer needed — and will thus reduce the "parent dropout" rate.

Creating a culture or environment for parent involvement includes mapping effective strategies. Within the service-learning context, the same holds true. Whatever one's role — teacher, administrator, or parent leader — consider these possibilities when initiating or developing opportunities for parents as partners. In reviewing the list on the following

page, consider that, like students experiencing high-quality service-learning, parents also need opportunities for preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration (Kaye 1998).

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Strategies for Parent Involvement

School communities may decide to form a task force or committee to develop and lead implementation of parent involvement in service-learning. Include representatives of all stakeholders for the best results; read about the opportunities for parent involvement; and consider the similarity to what students should experience in high-quality service-learning:

- Inform teachers, administrators, and school staff about the value of parent involvement when developing their ability to effectively work with and engage this population. In short, go beyond simply welcoming parents as partners: Create meaningful opportunities for participation.
- Make sure parents have a variety of ways to understand service-learning, its benefits, and roles they can fill that contribute to youth success. These opportunities can occur at back-to-school events, parent education gatherings, or special workshops that develop a cadre of parent champions for service-learning. Communication can continue through school newsletters, displays, and at most school events.
- Offer parents opportunities to observe and participate in service-learning, including experiences where their own children are not involved; this is particularly effective in middle and high school where teens are less likely to want their parents to be present.
- Provide various ways for parents to support service-learning, building on their skills, talents, and interests, with opportunities to develop their abilities. Parents can help with grant-writing, become knowledgeable about curriculum connections, network with community agencies, and help document the service-learning process.
- Invite parents to reflect and offer their feedback and insights about service-learning experiences.
- Offer parents ways to demonstrate what they have experienced while becoming resources and leaders. They can, for example, assist in recruitment, preparation, action, and reflection through the creation of parent service-learning support groups.⁴
- Be mindful of the challenges facing parents: time constraints, travel, language, cultural inhibitions, and even needs of their other children.
- Provide parents with avenues for assistance from administrators, faculty, other parents, and community members; similarly, offer ways to advance their participation, including becoming spokespeople for service-learning, locally and nationally.

Parent Roles

Recruit parent liaisons, much like “room parents,” who keep service-learning in mind. Once identified, these parents can coordinate many of the following tasks:

- Organize phone trees to alert other parents about needs, questions or opportunities for involvement.
- Provide a ready-made “focus group” to generate ideas about community needs and resources.
- Facilitate student group work by moderating group discussions.
- Contact community organizations to maintain and update a catalogue or directory of potential collaborations.
- Be visible with service by helping in places that students see parents in action, such as assembling parent information packets in the school cafeteria.
- Chaperone field experiences.
- Prepare supplies, particularly for classrooms of younger children.
- Document service-learning activities by keeping a record of words, photographs, or video. While youths may have these roles, parents may be valued assistants if documentation requirements are extensive.
- Write grants or assist in getting donations or in-kind materials. Some schools offer workshops to help build a cadre of grant-writing parents.
- Attend conferences and workshops as school representatives and service-learning spokespeople, and even as copresenters in workshops.
- Coordinate family service opportunities and post these on school websites and in newsletters to encourage service as a family habit. While “family service” resembles traditional volunteerism more than service-learning, the benefits of parental modeling and establishing traditions and habits of civic participation may significantly contribute to young people becoming lifelong learners and lifelong servers.
- Network with other schools as representatives or conveners of gatherings to bring together involved or interested parents from neighboring schools. This approach can often result in ongoing regional associations supportive of service-learning.

Parent-Initiated Strategies for Service-Learning Involvement

Parents who are already experienced with service-learning can help communicate to other parents both the process and the value of parent-child reflection activities. Experienced parents can share examples of reflection activities. The school's newsletter can be an inclusive forum that reaches the diversity of the school population, describing parent/child experiences related to service-learning projects. Here are some ideas for involvement in reflection:

- Share personal stories about service involvement including stories of other family members.
- Pay attention to social concerns that captivate youths. Use their questions as clues of interest; resist quick answers, and instead discuss ways to find out more together.
- Engage youths in discussing community interests and observing of community needs.
- Read books aloud that relate to service themes; these stimulate discussion and encourage conversation about experiences, concerns, and questions. (Note: reading books aloud is effective at all ages.⁶⁾)
- Use newspaper articles, television programs, or movies to investigate topics of interest and those that highlight community members, including youths, as problem solvers.
- Refer to information received from the school about service-learning; ask questions that delve into the substance of the subject.
- Perform service as a family through established community organizations or by sharing what family members enjoy doing together, such as hosting a library read-aloud, baking for local shelters, or participating in the Special Olympics.

Youth-Initiated Strategies for Parent/Family Involvement in Service-Learning

Use the classroom to role-play conversations and interviews, and involve students in thinking of additional ways to involve parents and other family members and adult friends.

- Interview parents about community needs in general or specific issues; these questions can be a survey composed during class time with responses compiled and used to advance the project.
- Select a topic to learn about together that informs a school service-learning experience.
- Apply an area of study and service to home — for example, recycling, monitoring water use, or practicing reading aloud to younger children.
- In small groups in class, develop a game that teaches others about service-learning and try it out on parents, applying their feedback to improve the product.
- For younger children, send home a book for the child and parent to read and discuss. With older students, this interaction could be through a newspaper or magazine article or short story. Students can brainstorm a list of discussion-starters to take home and return with comments, and further questions for inquiry.
- Plan a family service experience that could be done at home or in the community; document what happens, and the impact on each participant. **G2G**

Source: Adapted from *Parent Involvement in Service-Learning* by Cathryn B. Kaye, Columbia, S.C.: South Carolina Department of Education, 1998. Copies are available through the National Dropout Prevention Center at www.dropoutprevention.org.

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Photo courtesy of CNCS.

1. The term “parent” refers to all adults who take on the role of parenting children.
2. Title I of NCLB (Section 1118) outlines requirements for schools, districts, and states to create partnerships between parents and schools. Under NCLB, schools are required to provide opportunities for parent involvement, including having parent-teacher meetings, reporting to parents on their children’s progress, helping parents work with their children to improve achievement, offering parents opportunities to volunteer, and involving parents in the planning and design of school programs (Vaden-Kiernan 2005, 1).
3. The notes in parenthesis are the statements that the recent NCES survey (Vaden-Kiernan 2005) used to assess the extent to which these recommendations were met in U.S. public schools comparing 1996 data with 2003 data. That study found little difference between 1996 and 2003.

4. Keep in mind that parents are not always available to children; always offer an opportunity to complete assignments with older siblings or other adult family members or neighbors.
5. See the Growing to Greatness website, www.nylc.org/g2g, for a recommended booklist for parents.

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