

## Choosing Service-Learning Projects

Once administrative approval for A Week of Service Learning has been received, the student voice must be heard. Teachers have vast experiences and wonderful ideas for service, but the projects and ideas must come from the students if they are to “buy into” the service and gain from the service learning. Adults often recognize a need and then tell the students how to solve it. This is not service learning because the students are not actively engaged in critical thinking or problem solving. True service learning, however, requires that students brainstorm ideas, organize needs, seek information and with teacher assistance, plan the service-learning project.

### **Student Responsibilities:**

- Networking with the individuals involved in the project
- Planning schedules
- Preparing the timeline for achievement
- Organizing materials
- Implementing the service-learning project
- Reflecting during and upon completion of the project

**REMEMBER:** True service learning necessitates that students apply learned, curricular skills to solve a real-world issue.

Some teachers may find it difficult to relinquish some of the decisions and control to the students. Service learning is about students making decisions and controlling outcomes. The teacher role is to serve as a guide or mentor, to make suggestions, and to question project components in order to ensure that all areas are addressed.

For example, it is appropriate for the teacher to inform the students that a local nursing facility for elders has contacted her/him concerning the lack of interaction between community youth and the residents. The students should then brainstorm ideas and solutions and use a planning process to discern if there is student interest in solving the problem. Guidance concerning school rules and budget can be given by the teacher. Perhaps a group of students proposes a “senior to senior” game day in order to connect the youth and elders. Students suggest busing the nursing facility residents to the school. Effective teacher questioning, such as “What about the individuals whose mobility is restricted and cannot leave the facility?” can help students critically think through the needs of the situation.

The teacher role is to continue effective questioning until students formulate a plan in keeping with school rules and expectations. The use of questions, such as Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How?, will enable students to know that some ideas are not workable and find other solutions.

An example of appropriate questioning is working with a student who wanted to create a city-wide recycling trash compactor to be used by all residents. The student proposed to construct and place the compactor in a downtown, central location. The student was asked, “Will your parents load their trash and haul it downtown to be compacted?” The student response was “No.” Upon further questioning, the student realized that if her/his own parents would not load and transport trash, other individuals might not as well. The student realized a change in plan was needed, and after discussions with school officials and organizations, a school-wide recycling effort was implemented. The student learned flexibility, networking, and organizational skills while accomplishing a community

need. Instead of rejecting a student's ideas, the teacher used questioning techniques to help the student develop a workable solution for a community need.

If given opportunities to be successful, students can plan and implement plans even when the adult has reservations about the project. For example; a group of students saw a need for smoke detectors to be purchased and installed in the homes of elderly community members. Initially, the teacher thought the plan was not workable. However, through effective questioning, the teacher learned that the students had not only begun the planning process but also had established a way to purchase and install the smoke alarms and had developed a partnership with the local fire department.

**LISTEN TO YOUR STUDENTS.  
THEY HAVE THE VOICES  
THAT WILL CHANGE THE WORLD.**

### **Inspiration for Project Ideas**

- Current events
- Educational excursions around the city, campus, care centers, nursing facilities, retirement facilities, shelters, etc.
- Everyday objects, such as plastic bottles, and baby cribs
- Magazine/newspaper articles
- Meetings with community leaders
- Reading children's books or grade level books
- Social networking boards and walls
- Surveys


### **Questions to Ask When Choosing Projects**

- What are our goals?
- What is our timeline for completion?
- What supplies and materials do we need and how will we procure them?
- What help do we need, and can we receive it?
- What skill sets are required, and do we have individuals that possess those skill sets?
- What approvals do we need?
- How will we showcase and market our accomplishments in order to highlight learning?

### **Long-Term vs. Short-Term Service-Learning Projects**

The size of the project is of less importance than the knowledge and skills being gained from the experience. Projects should be chosen on interests, capabilities, time required, money required, and available resources. See below for an example of a long-term project and a short-term project.

- Long-term project
  - After students met with the staff of a local care center concerning needs, the students decided to use their knowledge and skills to landscape the care center with indigenous plants to prevent erosion and add overall enjoyment for the residents. A resident-accessible gazebo would also be planned and constructed. Students secured funding for the project and formed a partnership with Lowe's. The staff at Lowe's helped the



students with design and construction ideas. Students from the Agriculture Science classes constructed the gazebo while other students assembled benches or purchased and planted flowers and plants. Many hours were spent on-site.

- Short-term project
  - After researching public health issues in a Lifetime Nutrition and Wellness class, students decided to use their knowledge and skills to inform consumers about low cost, healthy recipes. The students received approval from the local supermarket and secured funding for supplies and materials to plan and implement mini-demonstrations at the local supermarket. Students worked in small groups to present demonstrations showcasing quick, simple, healthy, and affordable recipes to help prevent future health problems. Students worked to create an attractive display, research the nutrition for each recipe, and practice preparing the recipe. Actual on-site demonstrations were one day only.