

THE FUTURE OF SERVICE-LEARNING IN MARYLAND SCHOOLS

by Richard Blissett, Vanderbilt University

In 1992, Maryland became the first state in the nation to institute a requirement for all students to participate in service-learning before graduating from high school. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, service-learning “integrates classroom instruction with community service activities.” In order to graduate, Maryland students are required either to complete 75 hours of service-learning activities or a locally-designed service-learning program approved by the superintendent.

Now, over 20 years later, there is a long record and it is time to ask how well the requirement is serving its intended purpose of developing citizens with the motivation and skills to give back to their communities. My brief summarizes what researchers have learned about service-learning programs in this regard across the country and poses questions and policy issues that Maryland should consider as it explores future directions for its mandatory program.

Evidence about the Effectiveness of Service-Learning

Service-learning programs enjoy a good public image and lots of favorable media attention, and have thus spread rapidly across the country. In 1984, some 900,000 American students were involved in these programs, but that number grew to 12,605,740 students by 1997. More and more U.S. school systems are making community service mandatory for all students.

But do these programs actually work? It is challenging to tell because studies often have not used controlled comparisons between students who participate and those who do not, and very few have probed for sustained impacts. In addition, many studies depend on self-reports from students and teachers, so it is possible that responses are a result of participants’ ideas of what is socially desirable to say or a temporary glow of satisfaction that often follows participation in community service.

For studies of voluntary service-learning programs, an additional challenge is “self-selection bias,” the reality that students who choose to participate may already be more civically inclined than those who do not choose to participate, and as such the exact additional effects of the programs are hard to isolate. Studies of mandatory programs face a different challenge: figuring out whether mandating that all students do service can have negative as well as positive effects. Psychological research suggests that compelling behavior can undermine personal willingness to undertake those behaviors voluntarily at a later time. For service-learning programs, the research is equivocal so far, but finding answers on this issue is critical for assessing how well Maryland’s mandatory program serves students for the long run.

Despite all of these issues, the best available studies – plus scholarly examinations of trends across all studies – point to real benefits from service-learning: modest but statistically significant positive effects on academic, personal, and citizenship outcomes later in students’

lives. In addition, studies suggest that the positive effects hold for programs at all educational levels, that service-learning can reduce achievement gaps between groups of students, and that service-learning can increase employability skills for adolescents.

In the field, there are many accepted markers of quality service-learning programs. These characteristics, which were distributed as national standards in 2008, include:

- Integration of the service-learning activities with academic curricula,
- Sustained and meaningful activities that challenge youth and give them a voice, and
- Respect for diversity and efforts to create relationships between schools and communities.

Implementation studies offer further insights. Using a nationally representative sample of high school students, one study found a high level of participation in service-learning among students, but mostly in short-term efforts once or twice a year. A California study concluded that "service-learning was most often practiced by one or a few committed teachers in a school, that teachers were having difficulty implementing service-learning effectively, and that few schools were embracing service-learning as a way to realize school-wide goals." The structure of service-learning programs is important, and several scholars have recommended that they move beyond projects to be integrated into already-existing programs.

Maryland's Program and Its Future

Maryland has drawn from interviews with teachers identified as successful in their districts to develop "best practice" principles for service-learning. These align well with what research across the country has found. However, a key issue for Maryland remains the implicit equality its graduation requirement implies between spending 75 hours in service participation and engaging in meaningful service-learning.

In sum, there are many research questions that are yet to be answered, which include:

- To what extent are Maryland's students and graduates showing real personal and civic gains from service-learning, and how does the mandatory requirement moderate these effects?
- Does having a 75-hour requirement guarantee service experiences of sufficient duration and intensity to deliver maximum educational benefits?
- What resources are needed to implement high-quality service-learning programs, and are they currently being provided in all school districts across the state?
- To what extent are communities as well as individual students benefiting?
- How does the implementation and effectiveness of service-learning differ in relatively advantaged versus relatively disadvantaged communities?

Although this is not an exhaustive list, reforms in Maryland's service-learning program should be based on research-based answers to questions like these. Service-learning shows great promise, and it is time for the state of Maryland to take stock of what its program has accomplished and figure out where it should go next.