

National Association of State Boards of Education

## ➔ Harnessing Service Learning to Build Social, Emotional, and Academic Skills

By Megan Blanco

As of the 2017–18 school year, state policy in 37 states and the District of Columbia required or encouraged districts to include community service education or service learning programs (figure 1).<sup>1</sup> These states recognize the potential of service learning to connect academic curricula to community problem solving and to build students’ social, emotional, and academic competencies, including social awareness, empathy, and ethical responsibility.<sup>2</sup> The instructional practice also fosters civic engagement, career exploration, and school connectedness.

Whether through applying lessons of coastal erosion to wetland cleanup, developing a

growth mind-set and resilience while tutoring struggling young readers, or combating intergenerational poverty by constructing affordable homes, students of all backgrounds, circumstances, and academic standing are on equal footing with service learning. For some, these experiences spark an interest in pursuing a lifetime of military, national, or public service. Others receive exposure to career pathways they may not otherwise have considered.

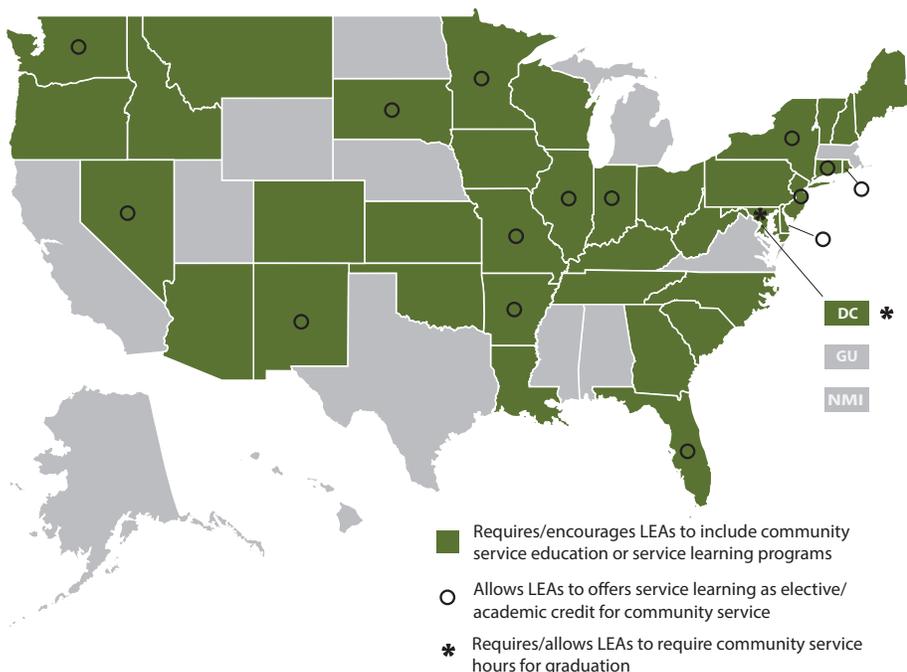
“The return on the hundreds of billions of dollars invested in education each year must be measured not just in terms of individual success in educational attainment and in the job market or even national economic growth,” the U.S. Department of Education contended in a 2012 report on civic learning and engagement. “It also must be gauged by how well the next generation of Americans is prepared to solve collective problems cre-

atively and collaboratively.”<sup>3</sup> Service learning helps students bridge divides and build relationships with their peers as they tackle societal challenges together.

According to polling data, parents and community leaders support K-12 schools preparing students for the real world and teaching them values like respect, leadership, and responsible decision making, all of which service learning is designed to help students achieve.<sup>4</sup> Service learning produces gains in academic performance, several studies suggest, with effect sizes that are even stronger than the significant gains in attitudes toward self and learning, civic engagement, and social skills.<sup>5</sup>

“Because service learning is a pedagogy that intentionally connects community service to classroom learning, the most important student outcomes are educational—improved academic engagement and achievement,” said Jill Rough, director of research and analysis at the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service. “As for student outcomes beyond the classroom, a stronger understanding of civic responsibility and improved attitudes toward service are among the most impactful.”

**Figure 1. Service Learning by State**



### HOW STATES SUPPORT SERVICE LEARNING

Service learning embeds service activities within academic classes to help participants achieve specific learning goals aided by related assignments, reflection, and instruction. Community service does not necessarily require a learning goal and can occur outside the education system. State policymakers have promoted both in a variety of ways.

**Allow local education agencies (LEAs) to offer service learning as an elective or award academic credit for community service hours.** Fifteen states allow LEAs to offer service learning as an elective or award academic credit for community service hours. In Arkansas, a student who completes at least 75 hours of certified community service during grades 9-12 becomes eligible to re-

ceive one academic credit that may be applied toward graduation. In addition to providing credit hours for volunteer service, Delaware's policies emphasize the important role guidance counselors can play "by stressing the desirability of giving back to one's community, helping people and of the benefits of such experience in the process of finding employment and applying for acceptance in institutions of secondary education."<sup>6</sup>

**Require or allow LEAs to require community service hours for graduation.** The District of Columbia requires high school students to complete 100 hours of community service in order to graduate, and Maryland requires high school students to complete 75 hours of community service to graduate.

**Award a service learning diploma endorsement.** Louisiana provides guidance and resources to LEAs interested in awarding a Community Service Diploma Endorsement to high school students who have completed 80 service hours within their community by the time they graduate. Virginia's Civics Education seal requires, among other things, 50 service hours.

**Encourage LEAs to promote community service in K-12 schools by facilitating or teaching about community service and engage the community in these efforts.** In support of its expectations for character education instruction that explicitly aims to cultivate traits like perseverance, respect, and integrity, North Carolina encourages LEAs to instruct students through service learning.<sup>7</sup> Ohio law requires LEAs with community service education to establish a community service advisory committee consisting of at least two students and a volunteer management employee who advise on the development, implementation, and periodic review of a community service plan.<sup>8</sup>

Other state approaches include the following:

- require K-12 schools to offer a community service program;
- approve best practices, program guidance, or a list of community service programs for voluntary district use;
- allow service learning to count toward

work-based learning experiences associated with secondary career and technical education program requirements; and

- adopt language encouraging students to consider community service when developing a high school graduation plan.

## **MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR POLICYMAKERS**

As standing governmental bodies that meet regularly, state boards of education are well equipped to convene multiple stakeholders from diverse sectors for information sharing, collaboration, system improvement, public awareness, and relationship building. By employing this authority for service learning, state boards can invite state education agency (SEA) or LEA staff to present at a board meeting, host a forum on service learning, and report the findings to the public (for example, on best practices for leveraging school-community partnerships). State boards can work closely with leaders at the SEA, workforce development commission, and state service commission (in most states, managed under the governor or lieutenant governor's authority) to identify opportunities for maximizing efforts to achieve mutual goals through service learning.

States may choose to publicly recognize schools that excel at providing service learning opportunities and engage their community through such partnerships—similar to the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll, which is federally administered. State board members frequently connect with students and school personnel via school visits and public forums. Building upon these engagement strategies, state board members may consider participating in back-to-school service projects at schools in their local districts. Much like the U.S. Congress and the president of the United States do annually, state boards can also adopt resolutions observing the two national days of service—Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service and September 11 National Day of Service and Remembrance—and encourage young people to serve in their communities on these days. The Corporation for National and Community Service offers free and accessible sample proclamations for public officials and sample lesson plans and activities to support practitioners who wish to observe these significant occasions.<sup>9</sup>

When enhanced through aligned classroom instruction, assignments, and reflection, community service connects all learners—regardless of aptitude or academic prowess—to the skill-building opportunities they need to succeed in academics, work, and citizenship. As schools seek not only to develop students' social, emotional, and academic skills but to provide students with real-world opportunities that apply those skills, service learning offers a way to do both. Through policymaking, collaboration, and public recognition, state boards can foster these enriching learning opportunities while developing more engaged, informed, connected citizens.

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## **NOTES**

1 State Policy Database, "Community Service Education/Service Learning," web page (Alexandria, VA: NASBE), <https://statepolicies.nasbe.org/health/categories/community-involvement/community-service-education-service-learning>.

2 Thomas Berkas, "Strategic Review of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Service-Learning Projects, 1990–1996" (Battle Creek, MI: W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 1997); Shelley H. Billig, "Research on K-12 School-Based Service-Learning: The Evidence Builds" draft (Denver: RMC Research Corp, 2000), [http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/Billig\\_Service\\_Learning.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/Billig_Service_Learning.pdf); Edward B. Fiske, "Learning in Deed: The Power of Service-Learning for American Schools" (Battle Creek, MI: W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2002).

3 U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary and Office of Postsecondary Education, "Advancing Civic Learning and Engagement in Democracy: A Road Map and Call to Action" (Washington, DC: author, 2012).

4 Edge Research, "How to Talk about Social and Emotional Learning with Community Influencers," presentation (Alexandria, VA: NASBE, April 2019), [http://www.nasbe.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/NASBE\\_SELnetworkSurveyFindings\\_FINAL\\_April-2019.pdf](http://www.nasbe.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/NASBE_SELnetworkSurveyFindings_FINAL_April-2019.pdf); PDK Poll, "Frustration in the Schools: Teachers Speak Out on Pay, Funding, and Feeling Valued" (Arlington, VA: PDK, September 2019).

5 Christine Celio, Joseph Durlak, and Allison Dymnicki, "A Meta-Analysis of the Impact of Service-Learning on Students," *Journal of Experiential Education* 34, no. 2 (2011): 164–81.

6 Delaware Volunteerism Act, Title 14, Delaware Administrative Code, Chapter 89A.

7 North Carolina General Statutes, § 115C-81.60. Character Education.

8 Ohio Rev. Code, § 3313.605 Community Service Education Program.

9 Corporation for National and Community Service, "Serve in Your Community," web page (Washington, DC: author, N.d.), <https://www.nationalservice.gov/serve>.

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