

## Youth Service-Learning: A Family-Strengthening Strategy

Policy Brief No. 21

By developing the skills and capabilities of disadvantaged youth, service-learning strengthens low-income families and their neighborhoods.

### Overview

Service-learning advances youth on their quest to become responsible adults who contribute to their communities and workplaces. It provides opportunities for important developmental growth in psychological, social, and intellectual realms.<sup>1</sup> Numerous studies have found high-quality service-learning programs improve academic achievement (including among disadvantaged youth), lower school dropout and suspension rates, and reduce the likelihood of teen pregnancy.<sup>1,2</sup> High-quality service-learning programs give youth responsibility, with support, for planning, making decisions, and solving problems related to the community.<sup>3,4</sup>

Youth service-learning is a place-based family-strengthening strategy. First, it strengthens youth who are a critical asset in their families and communities. Second, service-learning strengthens community vitality by connecting community institutions, schools, and families in ways that create settings that foster positive youth

development. Finally, service-learning helps prepare young people to become successful adults and employees.

But too few youth participate in service-learning and service to others. According to the Search Institute, service to others is a “gateway asset” because it opens the doors for youth to experience many other experiences essential to development.<sup>5,6</sup> When many youth lack this development asset, the consequence for society is youth who are disconnected from community life and who are more likely to have difficulties during adolescence and as employable adults.

This policy brief focuses on how and why the human services community – from policy makers to practitioners – can invest in service-learning to not only facilitate the positive development of disadvantaged youth, but also strengthen their families and communities.

## What Is Service-Learning?

At the most elemental level, service-learning is community service plus a deliberate element that builds skills and knowledge (*see Definitions textbox*). Although estimates vary, between one-fourth to one-third of youth have participated in service-learning,<sup>5,7,8</sup> most often in school or afterschool programs.<sup>7</sup> The Education Commission of the States (ECS) offers the following definitions.

- *School-based* service-learning is “part of a school program and integrates school-set academic goals and curriculum into the service activity.”
- *Community-based* service-learning “is usually part of an afterschool or extracurricular program and often is conducted by a community-based organization serving youth directly. The curricular context, while providing a learning

context for the service activities, is [less specifically tied to] school-based academic goals.”<sup>9</sup>

Youth leadership in developing and running service-learning programs is critically important. It helps maximize both participation and outcomes and reduces dissatisfaction. Ultimately, youth leadership boosts the service-learning experience by empowering young people to be involved in solving community problems.<sup>4,10,11</sup>

### Service-Learning Is One Path to Youth Engagement

Youth service, including service-learning, is one of eight pathways for engaging youth in community change, as depicted in Figure 1. Youth-adult partnerships are a core principle underlying this model, because collaboration with adults has been key to youth realizing their full potential to build the common good.<sup>12,13</sup>

## Definitions for Key Terms Used in this Policy Brief

**Civic Engagement** – “a person’s capacity to work with others to affect common interests, to see oneself as a stakeholder in public life, to value the mechanisms for democratic decision making and to believe that individuals have a responsibility to contribute to their communities.” (YMCA of the USA<sup>61</sup>)

**Community Service** – “volunteerism that occurs in the context of community action taken to meet the needs of others or to better the community as a whole.” (Search Institute<sup>13</sup>)

**Service-Learning** – “Service-learning is a teaching and learning approach that integrates community services with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities, while fostering collaboration between educational institutions and civic, faith-based, and community groups.” (National Collaboration for Youth<sup>51</sup>). Service-learning is part of civic engagement.

**Youth-Led** – “When young people are the decision makers and take part in directing a plan.” (Youth Innovation Fund<sup>62</sup>)

**Youth-Organized** – When young people help plan and implement a service-learning initiative. (Adapted from Abravanel description of “youth voice.”<sup>9</sup>)

In this model, the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, drawing on definitions from the Search Institute and others, breaks down youth service into three types, each of which benefits young people.

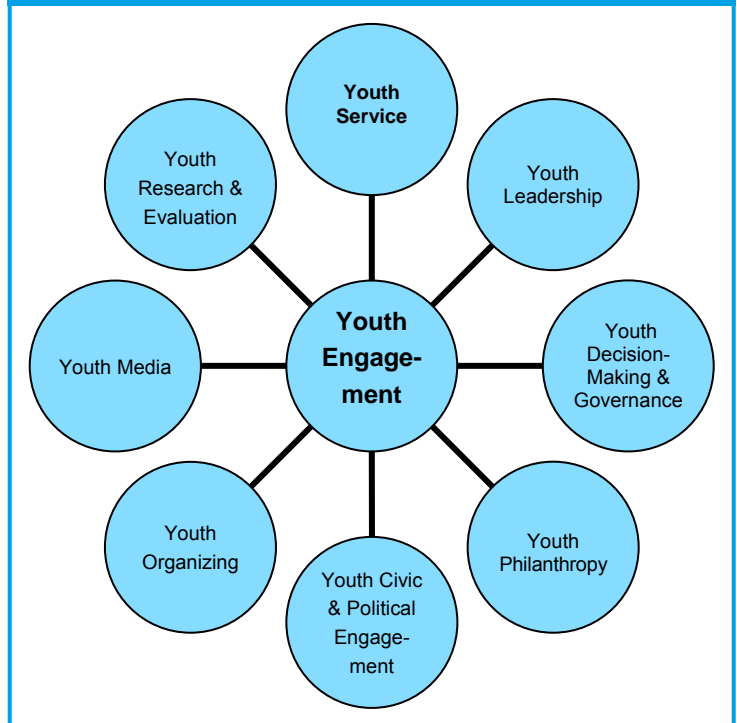
- *Volunteering*, which is distinct in its task-orientation and limited scope (such as not directly promoting community change).
- *Community service*, which represents a “deliberate approach [that] encourages participants to work together in solving community problems and improving quality of life.”
- *Service-learning*, which differs because it gives youth hands-on experience so they understand how their academic studies apply to real-world settings.<sup>12</sup>

### Youth-Created and Youth-Led: Even Better

One hallmark for successful programs is engaging students in planning, organizing, and making decisions about the service. Why? Because youth are experts about their communities, especially how it affects them and their families. They also bring energy, fresh insights, curiosity, and creative approaches. Their very interest in being involved in their community can signal a readiness to prepare themselves for adult responsibilities (e.g., by gaining work experience<sup>5</sup>).

By comparing service-learning participants to nonparticipants (n=1,052), Shelley Billig, in writing for the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE), concluded that high-quality service-learning programs are effective and that outcomes improve when young people have more responsibility for planning, making decisions, and problem-solving. In contrast,

**FIGURE 1. Youth Engagement Model from the Innovation Center<sup>12</sup>**



negative student perceptions about service tended to occur in programs in which youth had minimal input and inadequate training or other support for their role as decision-makers.<sup>3</sup> Other reviews of service-learning research support these findings.<sup>1,4,9</sup>

Leading-edge service-learning programs go beyond involving youth in day-to-day programming decisions (i.e., youth-organized) to ensuring young people have a substantial role in governance (youth-led). The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development and the National 4-H Council note that youth governance often occurs in partnership with supportive adults. The center’s research indicates that youth-led organizations and their adult partners can improve community connections with and responsiveness to local young people.<sup>14</sup>

## Service-Learning as an Essential Developmental Nutrient

Increasingly, community service, civic engagement, and service-learning are included as an essential element that fosters positive child and youth development. These activities help youth acquire important skills that enable them to transition successfully to adulthood.

Service-learning also connects young people to their families, schools, and community groups; provides a sense of place; develops their sense of responsibility to a greater whole; and extends social networks beyond their families and social circles.<sup>15,16</sup>

### Service-Learning and Prevailing Frameworks for Positive Youth Development

Service-learning, community service and involvement, and youth engagement fit with the positive youth development frameworks used by the nation's leading experts.

- The Search Institute includes community service among its 40 Developmental Assets™ that support positive youth development and reduce the likelihood of risky behaviors. Indeed, the Institute has found that *service to others is a “gateway” asset because service and service-learning may increase the odds that young people will experience 20 or more developmental assets.* The clustering of these assets is associated with academic success and healthy development.<sup>17,18</sup> (See Figure 2 for service-learning benefits.)

- Community service is one of five promises for youth – a set of resources that young people need to flourish, as promoted by America's Promise – The Alliance for Youth.<sup>19</sup>
- Forum for Youth Investment's Ready by 21™ approach – to ensure that all young people are ready for college, work, and life – encompasses community involvement. This approach recognizes that being active in communities contributes to positive youth development and positive outcomes in young adulthood.<sup>20-22</sup> (See Appendix A for additional information.)

Service-learning also fits within the framework developed by a joint committee of the National Research Council (NRC) and the Institute of Medicine (IOM). After carefully reviewing national and local experiences with community-based efforts to promote youth development, the NRC/IOM marked out a set of assets in four domains that “increase the healthy development and well-being of adolescents and facilitate a successful transition from childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood.”<sup>23</sup> In this framework, quality service-learning experiences are a strategy for building youth assets in intellectual, psychological and emotional, and social development (see Figure 4 in Appendix A).

Thus, experts agree: community service and involvement is an essential nutrient of positive youth development. In addition, all prominent positive youth development frameworks call attention to the influence of family and community on youth development. All focus on the assets that youth bring to families and communities.<sup>18,19,21</sup>

## How Does Service-Learning Benefit Youth?

The positive outcomes associated with service-learning are why it is part of the leading frameworks for facilitating positive youth development. Service-learning puts youth on a path toward a successful transition to adulthood, including graduating from high school with real-world experience. Service-learning also gives youth the opportunity to be a resource and to be valued.<sup>24</sup>

A growing body of literature documents that high-quality service-learning benefits youth in terms of academic achievement, reduction of risk behaviors, and development of protective assets. As summarized by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, service-learning “provides developmental opportunities that promote personal, social, and intellectual growth, as well as civic responsibility and career exploration. Most young people have critical needs in each of these areas that must be met if they are to make a successful transition from childhood to adulthood.”<sup>25</sup> Figure 2 captures some of the most important effects that can be obtained from high-quality programs. The nature of the service also affects outcomes.<sup>3,17,24,26</sup>

The *Growing to Greatness* 2006 survey<sup>a</sup> found service-learning was correlated to better grades: 72 percent of young adults with past participation in service-learning described their grades as mostly “A’s” as opposed to 45 percent of no-service respondents.<sup>24</sup>

Importantly, ***quality service-learning may benefit low-income and other disadvantaged youth more***

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<sup>a</sup> The National Youth Leadership Council commissioned the survey, which Harris Interactive conducted with 3,123 U.S. residents ages 18-28 years.

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—National Dropout Prevention Center/Network<sup>25</sup>

***than other young people***; thus, it has the potential to reduce the achievement gap between socioeconomic classes.<sup>3,26</sup> For example, low-income students who serve others do better academically and miss fewer school days than low-income students who do not participate in community service.<sup>26</sup> National evaluations suggest non-white and educationally disadvantaged participants realize greater positive impacts on academic performance than other students.<sup>27, 28</sup>

Involvement of parents/guardians and community members is one possible mechanism by which service-learning appears to particularly benefit young people. A literature review by the National Center for Family and Community Schools revealed that high levels of parent involvement – especially when linked to learning – are an essential ingredient for student achievement. Community involvement also appeared to positively relate to student success.<sup>29</sup>

**FIGURE 2. Benefits of Quality Service-Learning on Individual Youth**

| Developmental Realm             | Benefits of Service-Learning on Youth Participants   |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Academic Achievement            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved achievement test scores, grades, and homework completion.<sup>24, 30-32</sup></li> <li>• Increased attendance and classroom participation.<sup>30</sup></li> <li>• Greater motivation to learn.<sup>30</sup></li> <li>• More likely to achieve high school graduation and less likely to be suspended or drop out.<sup>33</sup></li> </ul>   |
| Civic Connections               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of strong work ethic<sup>34</sup></li> <li>• Greater sense of social responsibility and awareness of community needs.<sup>30</sup></li> <li>• Increased likelihood of voting, volunteering, and participating in community service as adults.<sup>24, 30, 35, 36</sup></li> <li>• More likely to have an important positive role model.<sup>24</sup></li> </ul>   |
| Personal and Social Development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationships with peers, family, and teachers become more positive and respectful.<sup>24, 30</sup></li> <li>• Greater sense of personal responsibility and self-esteem.<sup>25, 30</sup></li> <li>• Learned how to work with others.<sup>25</sup></li> <li>• Exposure to positive adult role models.<sup>25, 30</sup></li> <li>• Learned to trust and be trusted by others.<sup>30</sup></li> <li>• Increased empathy and gains in cognitive development.<sup>4</sup></li> <li>• Improved communication skills.<sup>24</sup></li> <li>• Positively affected leadership ability.<sup>24</sup></li> </ul> |
| Reduction in Risk Behaviors     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fewer behavioral problems<sup>4, 30</sup></li> <li>• Less likely to become pregnant, get arrested, or consume alcohol or drugs.<sup>24, 30, 31, 33, 37</sup></li> </ul>   |

**Consequences of Not Engaging Disadvantaged Youth in Service-Learning and Civic Life**

America’s Promise Alliance defines disadvantaged youth as those “who lack the resources and support to develop into their full potential as adults, parents, providers and participants in civic life.”<sup>34</sup> The alliance specifically identifies both service-learning

and “opportunities to help others” as a fundamental resource that all young people need.<sup>19</sup> Without such opportunities, disadvantaged youth have fewer avenues to connect with schools, family, and community. Ultimately, they may drop out of high school; be unprepared for college, work, and life; and have low levels of civic participation as adults.<sup>5, 38</sup>

In the national survey conducted for *The Silent Epidemic*, 81 percent of young people who left high school without graduating said service-learning and other opportunities for real-world experiences that make the classroom more relevant would have improved their chances of staying in school. The report specifically identifies service-learning, when coupled with an intensive, best-practices literacy program, as a promising strategy to assist at-risk students in staying on course for graduation.<sup>38</sup>

## How Does Service-Learning Strengthen Low-Income Families and Communities?

Many people associate service-learning with education and youth development. It is also a promising strategy for strengthening families with children. As this section describes, when service-learning enriches the capabilities and potential of young people, it also benefits their families and communities.

### Communities and Schools for Career Success (CS<sup>2</sup>)

Petaluma, California

*Extracted from Making a Difference in the Lives of Youth by the National Collaboration for Youth*<sup>63</sup>

Communities and Schools for Career Success (CS<sup>2</sup>) is a systems-change initiative that builds connections between schools and communities to help students progress successfully from elementary school through high school and subsequently make informed choices about post-secondary education and career opportunities. With support from the city, the school district, and a local human services agency, the CS<sup>2</sup> team developed an afterschool program to support students who were not thriving in a traditional academic environment and were academically at-risk. Many of these students were low-income youth from diverse backgrounds, some of whom lived in a variety of challenging family situations and in communities with limited options for constructive afterschool activities.

The afterschool program, one of several CS<sup>2</sup> Petaluma initiatives, utilizes multiple components to support academic success, youth development, and career exploration. Through service-learning projects, life-skills curriculum, on-site counseling, and collaboration with community partners, students re-engage with learning and find a safe place to experience positive tutoring, develop leadership skills, and become civically active. The staff engages in a variety of activities to promote the program to both students and parents. Their efforts have paid off because parents have responded very favorably. Also, average attendance for the 2001 – 2002 after-school programs was 94 percent, and program participants' grade point averages improved.

Youth play a leadership role and participate actively in every step of planning and implementing a service project. Each project supports the academic curriculum; provides a service to the community; involves community collaboration; utilizes students' voices; promotes civic responsibility; includes student reflection time before, during and after the project; and utilizes evaluation tools to measure progress toward the learning and service goals.

### **Youth Are Assets in Families**

Because of their skills and knowledge, youth are core family asset. They may care for younger siblings and older relatives, help families solve problems, supplement family income, serve as their parents' translator or reader, and provide a role model for siblings. It stands to reason that when youth participants in service-learning gain new skills and advance in their personal and social development, they can contribute more to family life.

Service-learning can benefit families in other ways. When service-learning participants gain new affiliations with community organizations, young people can better help their families learn about resources to support their progress towards self-sufficiency. Parents and family members can also

be the service recipients, as when youth provide computer training. Also, when service-learning involves parents/guardians, they, too, develop new skills and expand social networks.<sup>39</sup>

### **Young People Are Community Assets**

Service-learning is an investment in community vitality, both now and in the future. Near-term benefits include:

- Improvements yielded directly by the services performed by youth. Learn and Serve America reports that each year young people give more than 1.3 billion hours of community service.<sup>40</sup>
- Establishment of youth as community leaders.<sup>41</sup>
- Development of students' commitment to social and civic responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

### **Connecting Families Community Academy Public Charter School**

*Extracted from Service-Learning Curriculum Guide: A Guide for Developing Project Management Skills by Youth Service America in preparation for National Global & Youth Service Day in April 2007<sup>64</sup>*

Students in the community service club at the Community Academy Public Charter School held their Second Annual Foster Care and Adoption Carnival. The event gives foster children and their providers a chance to enjoy a day of free fun, games, and lunch. Other classes from Community Academy volunteered to run activity booths for the children, and the carnival also provided information and resources for adults who are interested in becoming foster parents. Information was also available for adults who were already foster parents and looking for community support options. Some of the stations for the children included "American Idol" themed activities, an egg race, and a moon bounce.

To prepare for the event, students learned the difference between writing a business letter and an informal letter as they solicited donations from companies and invited special guests to attend. They also learned about the local government structure as they reached out to local leaders to seek their participation in the day's events.

Twenty-six adults from the school and approximately 130 youth volunteered at the carnival. Out of the 46 foster children and families who were invited, 32 attended. Perhaps the most exciting outcome from the service-learning project was five new matches made between parents looking to adopt and children looking for a home.



- Increases in youth civic involvement.<sup>7</sup>
- Integration of schools into community life.<sup>24</sup>
- Engagement of community members into the mission of public education.<sup>24</sup>

Long-term service-learning yields occur when young people are:

- *Better prepared for work.* Service-learning develops the skilled workforce that communities need to stay competitive in the global marketplace. In a recent survey from a consortium of business research organizations, employers report that new entrants to the workforce are quite lacking in basic academic and “applied” skills needed to do their jobs. Critical thinking and problem solving, communications, professionalism/work ethic, and leadership are applied skills in which too few incoming workers have adequate preparation.<sup>42</sup> A quick review of Figure 2 (see page 6) against this list illustrates how quality service-learning programs is a promising strategy to address skill deficiencies in the future workforce. In addition, service-learning also may help youth explore career options.<sup>1</sup>
- *Ready to be lifelong participants in community affairs and service to others.* Volunteering, service-learning, and other ways of being involved with their communities provide youth from disadvantaged circumstances with a critical avenue to participate in civic life, according to the Corporation for National & Community Service (CNCS). The CNCS-sponsored survey indicates youth from disadvantaged circumstances who volunteer have more positive civic attitudes and behaviors than non-volunteering youth from disadvantaged

backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> Other scholars have reported similar results.<sup>1, 4, 7</sup>

- *Parent-role models* that raise their future children to engage in civic life as they do.<sup>5</sup>

### **Connecting Youth to Family and Community**

Service-learning is a family-strengthening strategy when it creates stronger ties between youth and their families and communities.

The service-learning experience can improve youth relationships with family members, teachers, and others as students learn to trust and be trusted by others.<sup>24,43</sup> As described by the Family Strengthening Policy Center in a policy brief on family volunteering,<sup>b</sup> participating together in community service enables parents and children to develop close relationships, learn together, and improve their neighborhoods.<sup>44</sup> The Search Institute, America’s Promise, and Forum for Youth Investment have all identified caring adults and supportive family relationships as key ingredients for the healthy, positive development of children and youth.<sup>18,19,21</sup>

Service-learning is also a way to (re-)connect youth with their communities.<sup>9,24</sup> In the *Growing to Greatness* 2006 survey, service-learning respondents were much more likely to describe themselves as being very or extremely satisfied with family and school life than young people not engaged in community service.<sup>24</sup> This finding dovetails with results from the 2004 *Growing to*

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<sup>b</sup> <http://www.nassembly.org/fspsc/practice/practices.html>

*Greatness* survey,<sup>c</sup> in which a strong majority of public school principals reported that service-learning had a “somewhat” to “very” positive impact on parent and family involvement (71 percent) and school-community relationships (91 percent).<sup>27</sup>

“Service-learning builds social capital, providing a way for young people to strengthen their connections with their schools, communities and families.”

– Kathy Payne, Community Alliances, State Farm Insurance<sup>24</sup>

### What Does It Look Like?

How can service-learning programs achieve a positive impact by strengthening families? Place-based family strengthening, as promoted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, understands child and youth development occur in the context of family and community. With the Family Strengthening Policy Center, the National Collaboration for Youth has begun to articulate the specific connections between youth and family development. The emerging paradigm is not one of drastic change in these various systems but of deliberate linkages between them. Youth-serving groups and family-serving agencies must each take responsibility for connecting clients or participants with needed resources and opportunities beyond their walls.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>c</sup> The National Youth Leadership Council commissioned the survey, which Westat, Inc. conducted with 1,799 public school principals (K-12).

For youth-serving organizations, service-learning in a family-strengthening context means:

- Actively involving parents/guardians/families in ways that are accessible for parents/guardians and that reinforce the concordance between family and community.
- Making parents/guardians aware of family-strengthening resources (e.g., the Earned Income Tax Credit, adult education, family resource centers) available to them.

For family-serving and human services agencies, service-learning in a family-strengthening context means being a partner in service-learning programs. As partners, family-serving agencies can provide service venues as well as assist in connecting youth and their families with supports and opportunities beyond the service-learning program.

### What Is the Problem?

Young people want to have opportunities to help shape their communities and develop their knowledge and skills. But not enough youth – especially those in low-income communities – have the opportunity to benefit from service-learning. Families, schools, community organizations, role models, and religious institutions all influence whether and how youth participate in community life. The 2007 CNCS and Rutgers 2002 surveys indicate by role modeling involvement in civic affairs, family members encourage young people’s participation.<sup>5,6</sup> Schools, mentors, and civic groups also can be instrumental in engaging youth in civic life.<sup>6</sup>

### Disadvantaged Youth Have Fewer Service-Learning Opportunities

Many youth do not have the opportunity to contribute to their schools or communities. According to the

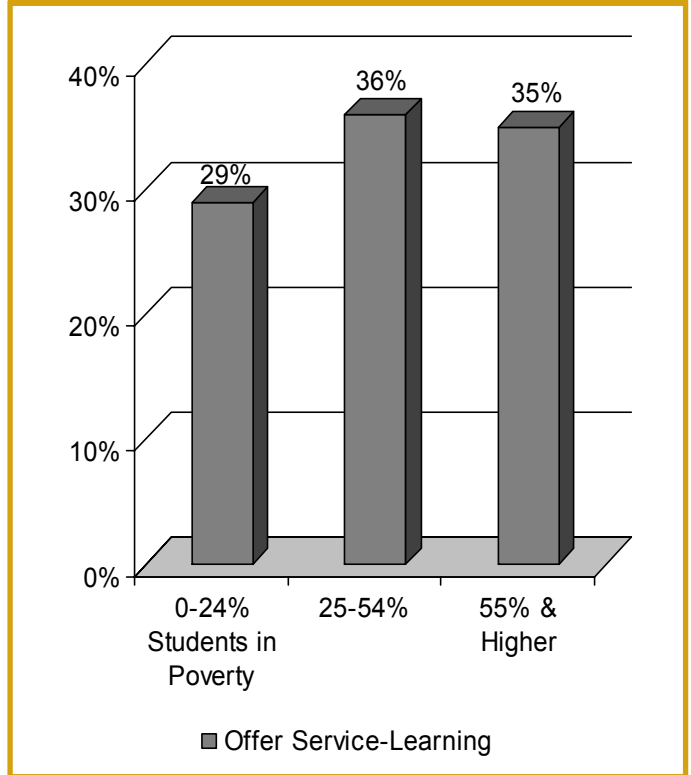
National Promises Study sponsored by America's Promise, 20 percent of teenagers lack useful roles and responsibilities in their communities. Moreover, the study's 6,000 interviews suggest only half of children ages 6-17 have opportunities to help others and adult role models who volunteer and help others.<sup>19</sup>

Nationally, less than one-third (28 percent) of U.S. public K-12 schools currently engage students in service-learning. One reason is that low-income students may have fewer service-learning opportunities, as shown in Figure 3. In the *Growing to Greatness* 2004 survey, only 29 percent of U.S. schools with 55 percent or more students in poverty offered service-learning in 2004, whereas about 35 percent of other schools did.<sup>27</sup> (No estimates were found regarding the availability of community-based service-learning programs.)

These data parallel the CNCS national survey in which 69 percent of youth from disadvantaged circumstances reported they have no past or current participation in school-based service or service-learning, compared to a participation rate of 60 percent for other youth.<sup>5</sup>

Notably, the *Growing to Greatness* 2004 survey suggested that compared to schools with lower proportions of poverty students, high-poverty schools were more likely to have structural supports in place associated with effective service-learning programs. Such supports – which suggest a greater emphasis on service-learning – include written policies that encourage participation, full-time program coordinators, and professional development opportunities and extra planning time for teachers. Principals in schools that have these supports report greater gains in students' academic achievement, students' personal and social development, and

**FIGURE 3. Schools Offering Service-Learning by Percent of Students in Poverty, 2004<sup>27</sup>**



community relations than principals in schools without supports.<sup>27</sup> A separate study by the Education Commission of the States produced similar findings.<sup>24</sup>

**A Growing Civic Engagement Gap**

Beyond service-learning, measures of the broader concept of civic engagement paint a troubling picture. Youth are increasing disengaged in civic life, with rates of disengagement highest among youth from lower socioeconomic groups.<sup>1,5,9,45</sup>

For example, of 19 possible forms of civic engagement considered in the CIRCLE 2006

survey, nationally 17 percent of young people ages 15-25 had not participated in *any* of these activities.<sup>45</sup> In a related 2002 survey that spanned multiple generations, Rutgers University researchers found a pattern in which both lower income and less educated groups were less likely to be involved in civic affairs or politics than those with more income or education.<sup>6</sup>

Service-learning acts as a springboard for lifelong civic engagement.<sup>4,12</sup> In fact, Jane Kendall, of the National Society for Experiential Education and an early proponent of service-learning, called for the inclusion of a civic element in service-learning. She noted that a “good service-learning program helps participants see their questions in the larger context of issues of social justice and social policy – rather than in the context of charity.”<sup>46</sup>

### **The Opportunity**

Young people already enrich their families, schools, and communities, but they can still be overlooked as an existing asset. Many youth want to do more. A companion survey to the National Promises Study revealed more than 50 percent want additional opportunities to volunteer alongside friends.<sup>19</sup>

The NRC/IOM report specifically encourages the integration of efforts to strengthen families, schools, and communities.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, a policy brief by the Family Strengthening Policy Center notes that engaging families in sustained and meaningful ways is an emerging practice in youth-serving agencies.<sup>47</sup>

Service-learning should be part of a rich developmental environment for youth that communities provide. The NRC/IOM committee recommended an array of opportunities because youth have different interests and are at different stages of development. Thus, diverse opportunities

offer the best odds for activating the development of young people’s full potential and reducing their risks.<sup>23,25</sup>

### **Best Practices for Engaging Disadvantaged Youth in Service-Learning**

Two common hallmarks of high-quality service-learning programs are relevant to service-learning as a family-strengthening strategy. These are:

- *Youth leadership and direction.*<sup>3,4,48</sup> Give young people roles in helping research and select service locations, recruit community partners, train their peers, evaluate projects, and allocate funding.<sup>4,24</sup> Programs can also place youth on advisory boards and governance committees. The Forum for Youth Investment recommends that programs be clear about their purposes for engaging young people and provide explicit information and encouragement about leadership opportunities.<sup>11</sup>

To be effective leaders, young people need training and support, along with opportunities to have a decision-making role, according to the National Collaboration for Youth.<sup>10</sup>

- *Opportunities for Parent and Family Engagement.* Parent engagement improves youth outcomes, and service-learning offers a way for parents to be involved in their children’s education and civic development. Service-learning programs can welcome parents and offer specific opportunities for them to help with planning and implementation. Preparing parents for this role can contribute to positive outcomes. In addition, family participation in community service can have value added when partnerships with other community organizations

enable families to connect with needed resources.<sup>24,47</sup>

Appendix B lists additional characteristics of high-quality service-learning programs.

### Engaging Youth in Service-Learning

To reach disadvantaged or disconnected youth, specific strategies are often necessary to recruit and sustain involvement. Promising strategies include:

- Creating flexible participation requirements.<sup>11</sup>
- Targeting the experience so youth see their service makes a visible difference (such as through direct contact with service recipients).<sup>19</sup>
- Making volunteering fun.<sup>10,19</sup>
- Asking youth to participate, having them come in a group, and providing meaningful and rewarding tasks. These strategies work with youth who are disengaged and meet their needs.<sup>49</sup>
- Including younger siblings who can be taught and engaged by older youth. This strategy gives older youth a teaching role and engages the next generation at a younger age.<sup>64</sup>

### What Are Key Challenges in Going from the Margins to the Mainstream?

A variety of issues create challenges in expanding quality service-learning opportunities for youth from disadvantaged circumstances.

#### Federal Level

A primary federal policy barrier is declining funding for Learn and Serve America, which is the only federal program that funds service-learning.<sup>50</sup> This federal program provides a 4:1 return-on-investment by leveraging private and other nonfederal resources. It also benefits communities across the

nation through the 40 million combined hours of service that youth participants give each year.<sup>51</sup>

Learn and Serve America provides financial and technical support to K-12 schools, community groups, and higher education institutions for service-learning projects. In addition to grants, communities rely on Learn and Serve America for training and technical assistance and for evidence-based models, curricula, and guidance.<sup>52</sup>

Funding for Learn and Serve America has dropped by 15 percent for fiscal years 2006 and 2007 from 2005 even though the nation's high school drop out rate remains unacceptably high and despite evidence indicating quality service-learning helps at-risk youth progress towards graduation. These prior cuts meant nearly 200,000 youth lost a key opportunity to serve.<sup>51</sup> The president's proposed \$5 million cut in funding – for a total fiscal year 2008 budget request of \$32.1 million – would further reduce access to service-learning for an additional 195,000+ youth, according to Youth Service America.<sup>50</sup>

#### Policy Level

To be effective, school-based service-learning needs flexible scheduling, especially if the students must leave campus for the service activity. In both school and community settings, other common challenges are transportation, time, and funding for incidental expenses related to the program.<sup>48,53</sup>

At all levels of the education system, competing priorities along with pressures to raise student academic performance can be additional barriers. Unless stakeholders understand how quality service-learning experience boosts student achievement, service-learning may be seen as ancillary.<sup>27,53</sup>

Search Institute researchers Peter Scales and Eugene Roehlkepartain found a high number of school administrative policies and supports for service-learning may contribute to not only high levels of student and teacher participation but also positive outcomes, including academic achievement. Two specific characteristics that seemed to matter were written policies that promote or require service-learning and in-service training for teachers.<sup>27</sup>

### **Community Level**

Service-learning mobilizes youth to be community assets, and not viewed by others as community problems. One reason youth from disadvantaged circumstances are less civically engaged is that they have insufficient opportunities in their

neighborhoods. The quality and quantity of services, organizations, and family supports varies tremendously across U.S. communities. On average, disadvantaged, urban neighborhoods have fewer institutions, role models, and school initiatives that can help engage young people in civic participation than do more advantaged neighborhoods.<sup>54,55</sup>

Youth Courts, also known as Teen, Peer and Student Courts, are a promising strategy to enrich the community environment for civic engagement by providing new service-learning opportunities. Found in both school and community settings, youth courts are programs in which youth deliver justice to their peers for minor offenses and other problem behaviors. To have the greatest benefit, service on

### **Quilting Together Community at Garside Junior High**

Las Vegas, NV

*Extracted from Service-Learning Curriculum Guide: A Guide for Developing Project Management Skills by Youth Service America in preparation for National Global & Youth Service Day in April 2007<sup>64</sup>*

As part of “Intergenerational Geometry,” students participated in a hands-on, creative project in which they used quilting as a way to learn the principles of measurement. During weekly after-school sessions, the Garside Junior High students were introduced to geometric concepts by designing and sewing quilts to be given to children at Child Haven, a temporary home for abused and neglected children who are involved in the Family Court System.

Using graph paper and computer software to design their quilts, students then cut their fabric using the proper angles to achieve desired shapes. After the pieces were cut, volunteers from a senior-citizen quilting group provided instruction on how to stitch the pieces together.

Fifty youth, all under the age of 12, volunteered in the project. The students had the opportunity to showcase their creations during a Quilting Bee that was held in conjunction with Family Math and Science Night. Afterwards, they visited Family Court to present the quilts to Child Haven. The goal of the project was to provide a comforting quilt that can belong to a child when he/she is in the system, and stay with the child as he/she returns home or is placed in foster care. Organizers hope to expand their program in the future by involving more children and donating the quilts to a larger number of non-profits.

youth courts must be paired with classroom study. The court acts as a learning laboratory for students to not only apply their knowledge of civics, but also develop critical thinking and leadership skills. While the number of youth court programs has expanded to more than 1,100, many communities have yet to establish such forums.<sup>56,57</sup>

### **Program Level**

#### *Enhancing Program Quality, Especially via Youth Leadership and Decision-Making*

Quality is one of two key challenges at the program level. School-based service-learning programs vary in quality, according to research by Billig, the National Youth Leadership Council, and others.<sup>3,24,27,48</sup> The Council's *Growing to Great* 2004 survey suggests contributing factors may include few dedicated funding streams for service-learning and a lack of curriculum time and resources for service-learning due to pressures of meeting No Child Left Behind Act requirements.<sup>27</sup> It is likely that community-based service-learning programs also vary in quality.

As previously reported, a core best practice is having young people lead and direct service-learning. Some research suggests not enough service-learning programs have structured the experience to:

- Give and empower young people with leadership roles and decision-making responsibilities,<sup>4,24</sup> and
- Optimize family and community connections.<sup>24</sup>

Some common challenges that occur in making the transition from youth-organized to youth-led are:

- Different views among partners of what youth leadership and decision-making look like.

- Different levels of interest in having young people as equal partners.
- Inadequate staffing, including professional development and training in positive youth development practices, resources, and capabilities to effectively guide the process of involving youth.<sup>4</sup>

A multitude of service-learning resources – guidelines, funding, training programs and more – are available to help schools offer high-quality service-learning programs. Youth-serving organizations can also tap into evidence-based technical resources and training. Both sectors have guidance on effective youth leadership and decision-making, but human services groups often lack such resources.

#### *Expanding Supports for Human Services Sector to Become Service-Learning Partners*

A second core challenge is building the capacity of human services organizations to be partners in service-learning. Not only do human services groups provide service venues, but they also can help youth and their families connect to resources. After all, youth development occurs in the context of family and community, and few youth-serving organizations are equipped to help youth with all their needs.<sup>16</sup>

Minimal technical supports exist for human services organizations that are interested in being the community partner in a service-learning program.<sup>58</sup> These supports are needed, in part, because educators, youth-serving organizations, human service organizations, and young people have different paradigms and languages.<sup>9</sup> To overcome these initial challenges to partnering, open and frequent communication can help each group

develop a shared framework that creates a positive experience for all.<sup>9</sup>

Funding is an additional barrier to broader engagement of human services organizations in service-learning. Being part of the service-learning partnership requires staff time and sometimes materials for participants. But these agencies have funding for serving their clients, but not necessarily for youth service-learning. Grants from a community foundation or corporate sponsor(s) can help fill this gap.<sup>9</sup>

## Policy Recommendations

In summary, service-learning is a family-strengthening strategy because it develops the capacity of youth as a core asset in their families and communities. Considerable research has documented the many ways that quality service-learning programs benefit youth participants. Although these positive impacts may be more pronounced for young people from disadvantaged circumstances, they are less likely to have access to and participate in service-learning opportunities than youth from higher socioeconomic circumstances.

Expanding service-learning programs could help close the education and civic engagement gaps that exist between socioeconomic classes. America's Promise recommends that all sectors of society work together to ensure all young people have a 21st century education, in which service-learning and civic involvement are components.<sup>19</sup> Priority must be given to disadvantaged and underserved youth.<sup>23,38</sup>

### Federal Government

To help youth service-learning programs reach their potential in terms of youth development and family

strengthening, the federal government ought to enable more disadvantaged youth to access service-learning opportunities, primarily through Learn and Serve America, which merits strong support. Each year, more than 400,000 students from low-income backgrounds engage in K-12 service-learning programs supported by the Corporation's Learn and Serve America. Grant recipients include both schools and nonprofit organizations.

Federal policy makers must **enhance the ongoing work of service-learning and strengthen Learn and Serve America** in the reauthorizations of both the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Corporation for National & Community Service. The potential for these reauthorizations to occur concurrently presents Congress and the Administration with important opportunities. The National Collaboration for Youth recommends:

- **Reauthorizing the Corporation for National & Community Service and keep Learn and Serve America grants program under the Corporation's purview.**

The CNCS strategic plan includes a goal of having service-learning in half of all K-12 schools by the year 2010. Through interagency cooperation and by strengthening the research, practice, professional education, and visibility of the impact of quality service-learning, the Corporation in partnership with the service-learning field is best positioned to reach this worthy goal.

In the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the National Collaboration for Youth recommends federal policy makers:

- **Include service-learning as an allowable use in activities supported by U.S. Department of Education funding,** such as 21st Century



Community Learning Centers, Physical Education Programs, and Mentoring programs.

- **Authorize the Department of Education to enter into cost-sharing agreements with the CNCS** for initiatives such as:
  - Longitudinal research on service-learning and dissemination of research findings;
  - Identification and dissemination of research-based best practices;
  - Integration of service-learning into state standards and outcomes;
  - Development of capstone service-learning courses; and
  - Provide within ongoing training institutes the opportunity for principals, teachers, paraprofessionals, afterschool and youth workers, and other school system administrators and staff to:
    - Improve the quality of service-learning instruction and delivery both during and after the school day; and
    - Create and sustain effective partnerships to advance service-learning between local education agencies, community-based, faith-based and other public agency organizations,

businesses and other stakeholders.

**Restore federal funding for Learn and Serve America grants.** By appropriating \$43 million for Learn and Serve America in FY 2008 – the traditional funding level for almost a decade, Congress can increase serving-learning opportunities for at-risk youth, a necessary step in engaging youth in community service.<sup>51</sup>

### **State and Local Governments**

State and local policy support for service-learning is essential. A first priority must be expanding the use of quality service-learning in schools and afterschool programs.

**Expand service-learning opportunities as a way to boost high school graduation rates.** Almost one-third of public high school students do not graduate on time.<sup>38</sup> Among African and Hispanic high school students, perhaps less than 50 percent graduate on time.<sup>19</sup> In undertaking the following actions, state and district-level decision makers should **give priority to students who are at risk of dropping out.** As recommended in *The Silent Epidemic*, service-learning for at-risk students ought to be paired with best-practices literacy programs and other intensive assistance to keep struggling students in school.<sup>59</sup> State and local policy makers ought to:

### **National & Global Youth Service Day**

At all levels of government, policy makers can provide high-level leadership to advance service-learning. Each April, National & Global Youth Service Day is an annual public awareness and education campaign that highlights the valuable contributions that young people make to their communities throughout the year. Policy makers can express support through proclamations and resolutions. Government officials can also participate in service events. More information is available from Youth Service America ([www.ysa.org](http://www.ysa.org)).

- Adopt written policies that encourage or require service-learning, integrate service-learning into K-12 curricula and afterschool programs, and allow scheduling changes to support service-learning
- Make training and technical assistance available to school districts, individual schools, and community-based organizations to design, compete for grants, implement, and improve service-learning programs. A particular need is for local training of staff and adult volunteers, along with young people, in how to nurture youth leadership.<sup>4</sup>
- Assure the availability of other supports for quality service-learning programs, such as transportation, funding for incidental expenses, and instructor planning time.<sup>27,48,53,59,60</sup>
- Educate school administrators, teachers, parents/guardians, and community leaders about the benefits of quality service-learning.
- Develop youth courts, which are one way to make civics come alive while providing the essential function of restorative justice.<sup>57</sup>

In partnership with youth-development and family-service agencies, state and local governments can foster youth leadership and decision-making in service-learning programs. First, they can support the **development of a common framework** (such as guidelines and definitions) that schools and community organizations can use to increase young people's role in designing and implementing service-learning experiences.<sup>4</sup> Second, state and local governments can offer **capacity-building grants that enable service-learning programs to successfully involve young people as decision-makers**. Both schools and community-based organizations would use the funding to devote staff

time to guide and manage the process of engaging youth. Some funding would support training, space, and materials.<sup>4</sup> Preference would be given to organizations that have a feasible plan for sustaining the effort after grant funding ends.

### Opportunities for Public/Private Partnerships and Grant-Making Institutions

When service-learning programs have a deliberate way to connect youth, families, schools, and other community resources together, families have improved access to supports that can help them progress towards self-sufficiency. Public-private partnerships can mobilize local and state governments, private foundations, community-based organizations, schools, and youth and their families to enrich neighborhoods with quality service-learning programs. These partnerships could do one or more the following initiatives.

- Assess the availability of and participation in service-learning in lower income neighborhoods, then create action plans to reach disadvantaged and disconnected youth.
- Educate human services and school administrators, policy makers, and youth development practitioners about the benefits of service-learning and elicit their support.
- Provide funding, technical assistance, training, tools, and policy support to new and existing service-learning programs.
- Evaluate existing service-learning programs with measures to assess impact on families and neighborhoods.

Public/private partnerships and grant-making institutions can reduce barriers to human services organizations being service-learning partners.

Promoting joint initiatives or partnerships makes use of existing expertise in the community and builds upon their resources. These stakeholders can:

- Assure human services organizations have adequate resources to support staff participation and materials used in the service-learning experience. New grant programs are one financing option; another is modifying existing funding streams so providing service-learning venues is an allowable expense when the youth service will directly benefit clients.
- Develop the capacity of human services and youth-serving organizations to come together to deliberately link service-learning to family and community development initiatives. For example, a foundation could sponsor periodic Web-based and in-person training sessions, arrange site visits to successful models, and identify and disseminate best practices and guidelines.
- Create forums that build cross-sector relationships and enable leaders to reflect on their experiences and lessons learned.

### Recommendations – Human Services Organizations

Youth development, child welfare, family-serving, and community development agencies share responsibility for helping the children, youth, and families they serve access resources necessary to achieve the most desirable outcomes for children and youth. (They are not, however, responsible for delivering all such supports and services.) The “new paradigm” is not a new approach to youth development but forging deliberate linkages between youth development, family development and community development with a focus on

generating more positive outcomes for children and youth.<sup>16</sup>

Human services organizations can reach out to schools and youth-serving organizations in their community to learn about service-learning programs and opportunities to be a service venue or part of their referral network. Human services organizations can also join community partnerships focused on youth development, reducing the high school drop out rate, and strengthening families. Each year, service-learning conferences and trainings occur and provide venues to learn more about service-learning.

Finally, human services organizations must commit to continuously training staff on important resources beyond their walls, including how to help clients access them, which is a necessary part of effective service delivery.<sup>16</sup>

### Resources

#### **CIRCLE (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement)**

<http://www.civicyouth.org/>

CIRCLE promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans ages 15-25 that has practical implications for those who work to increase young people's engagement in politics and civic life. CIRCLE is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship.

#### **Federal Youth Court Program**

[www.youthcourt.net](http://www.youthcourt.net)

The program is funded by a consortium of federal agencies. As part of the Federal Youth Court Program, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges serves as a central point of contact for youth court programs across the nation, provides informational services, delivers training and technical assistance, and

develops resource materials on how to develop and enhance youth court programs in the United States.

**The Forum for Youth Investment,  
Youth Policy Action Center**

[www.forumforyouthinvestment.org](http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org)  
[www.youthpolicyactioncenter.org](http://www.youthpolicyactioncenter.org)

The Forum for Youth Investment works with organizations interested in strengthening their youth programming and youth engagement strategies, partners with city-level organizations dedicated to helping young people improve educational and economic opportunities in their community, and seeks to connect promising practices and lessons learned to a broader community change agenda. The Forum hosts the *Youth Policy Action Center*, a collective effort by more than 80 national, state and local organizations to give youth and adults who care about youth a direct channel to communicate with their elected officials, access to the same tools used by professional lobbyists, and connections to organizations that can help them change youth policies.

**Innovation Center for Community and Youth  
Development**

<http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/>

The Innovation Center strengthens local organizations and builds their capacity to engage young people. Its areas of focus include youth-adult partnerships, leadership development, civic engagement, organizational development, and planning and evaluation. The Center offers an array of resources including research, curricula, planning, and evaluation tools.

**Learn and Serve America**

[www.learnandserve.org](http://www.learnandserve.org)

Learn and Serve America supports and encourages service-learning throughout the United States and enables more than one million students to make meaningful contributions to their community while building their academic and civic skills.

**Learning In Deed**

[www.learningindeed.org](http://www.learningindeed.org)

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation in 1998 launched Learning In Deed, a national initiative to engage more young people in service to others as part of their academic life. The Web site offers many service-learning resources.

**National Service-Learning Clearinghouse**

[www.servicelearning.org](http://www.servicelearning.org)

The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, a program of Learn and Serve America, offers timely information and relevant resources, thousands of free online resources, the nation's largest library of service-learning materials, national service-learning listservs, and reference and technical assistance services.

**National Human Services Assembly,  
Family Strengthening Policy Center**

[www.nassembly.org/fspc](http://www.nassembly.org/fspc)

The National Assembly's Family Strengthening Policy Center seeks to describe practice-based approaches to strengthening families raising children in low-income communities and policy implications. Relevant FSPC policy briefs include:

- *Family Volunteering: Nurturing Families, Building Community*
- *Family-Centered Community Building*
- *Family Strengthening in Youth Development*

**National Collaboration for Youth (NCY)**

<http://www.collab4youth.org/ncy/index.htm>

NCY, an affinity organization of the National Human Services Assembly, brings together almost 50 national nonprofit organizations that provide programs, services, technical assistance, training and evaluation to youth in America. Primarily community-based, the members of NCY have a significant interest in youth development. NCY members collectively serve more than 40 million young people, employ more than 100,000 paid staff, utilize more than six million volunteers, and have a physical presence in nearly every community in America.

*National Youth Development Information Center (NYDIC)*  
<http://www.nydic.org>

NYDIC is a one-stop Web site for youth workers with interest in any and all of the following areas: funding, programming, research, policy, job and training opportunities. NYDIC also provides current news to the youth development field and has one of the largest online libraries, providing practice-related information at low-cost or no cost. The December 2006 issue of *Youth Worker News* addresses how youth development organizations can nurture the skills of youth in order to instill habits of community engagement that continue into adulthood.

*Finding Inspiration in Literature & Movies (FILM)*  
[www.youthFILMproject.org](http://www.youthFILMproject.org)

NCY and Heartland Film Festival's Truly Moving Pictures have teamed together in the collaborative project called FILM. This literacy and film program encourages youth to complete three steps under the guidance of a youth facilitator, teacher, or parent. Youth see the featured films and read the accompanying books; they participate in activities from the free, downloadable activity guides; and they complete service projects that relate to the central themes of the books and movies. With its opportunity to reach over 40 million youth, FILM has the power to influence Hollywood to create more movies with positive, family-friendly messages.

**National League of Cities, Institute for Youth,  
Education and Families**  
[www.nlc.org/iyef/](http://www.nlc.org/iyef/)

The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute) helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of the children, youth, and families in their communities. The YEF Institute focuses on five core program areas: education and afterschool; youth development; early childhood development; safety of children and youth; and family economic success.

**National Youth Leadership Council**  
[www.nylc.org](http://www.nylc.org)

NYLC has been at the center of service-learning program and policy development since 1983. It annually convenes The National Service-Learning Conference, offers adult and youth trainings and develops service-learning resources.

**Next Generation Youth Work Coalition**  
<http://www.nydic.org/nydic/staffing/workforce/nextgen.htm>.

The Next Generation Youth Work Coalition brings together individuals and organizations dedicated to developing a strong, diverse afterschool and youth development workforce that is stable, prepared, supported and committed to the well-being and empowerment of children and youth. Achieving this goal will require progress in at least five key areas: standards and competencies; professional development and training resources; learning delivery systems; career and compensation guidelines and research and evaluation systems.

**YMCA Civic Engagement Guide**  
[http://www.ymcacivicengagement.org/guide/ce\\_guide.htm](http://www.ymcacivicengagement.org/guide/ce_guide.htm)

Although published as a resource for local YMCA programs, the concepts from this guide can be applied to any organization. It was produced with a goal to develop civic engagement attitudes, skills and behaviors in young people ages 15 through 22.

**Youth Service America (YSA)**  
[www.ysa.org](http://www.ysa.org)  
[www.servenet.org](http://www.servenet.org)

YSA is a resource center that partners with thousands of organizations committed to increasing the quality and quantity of volunteer opportunities for young people, ages 5-25, to serve locally, nationally, and globally. YSA coordinates the annual National and Global Youth Service Day, the largest service event in the world; the YSA curriculum guide for the day is available at <http://www.ysa.org/Nysd/resource/ny07resrc/cg/2007cgComplete.pdf>, YSA also hosts *SERVEnet* providing the largest database of volunteer opportunities in America.

## APPENDIX A: Service-Learning in Positive Youth Development

Figure 4 gives a snapshot of provisions in positive youth development frameworks that pertain to service-learning.

**FIGURE 4. Service-Learning and Prevailing Frameworks for Positive Youth Development**

| Framework   | Support or Asset that Relates to Service-Learning, Community Service, and Community Involvement   |
|---|---|
| <p>Assets for Positive Youth Development</p> <p><i>National Research Council</i><sup>23</sup></p> | <p>Over time, youth need a combination of assets across domains (physical, intellectual, physiological and emotional, and social) that facilitates positive youth development. Service-learning directly relates to social development assets, especially those listed below. Secondary impacts may occur in other domains such as life skills, prosocial values, and school success. The three most relevant assets are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Sense of social place/integration – being connected and valued by larger social networks.”</li> <li>• “Commitment to civic engagement.”</li> <li>• “Attachment to prosocial/conventional institutions, such as school, church, and nonschool youth programs.”</li> </ul>                              |
| <p>Five Promises</p> <p><i>America’s Promise–The Alliance for Youth</i><sup>19,34</sup></p>       | <p>The five promises are a set of resources young people, especially disadvantaged youth, need to flourish. Consistently experiencing four or five promises has the potential to level the playing field for youth across racial and ethnic lines. Within this “whole child” approach, one promise is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Opportunities to make a difference through helping others. Every child and youth needs and deserves the chance to make a difference – in their families, schools, communities, nation and world – through having models of caring behavior, awareness of the needs of others, a sense of personal responsibility to contribute to larger society and opportunities for volunteering, leadership and service.”</li> </ul> |
| <p>Forty Developmental Assets™</p> <p><i>Search Institute</i><sup>17,18</sup></p>                 | <p>Research indicates each developmental asset helps youth grow up as healthy, caring, and responsible young people. Some of the most relevant assets relating to service-learning are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Service to others.”</li> <li>• “Young people are given useful roles in the community.”</li> <li>• “Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.”</li> </ul>  |
| <p>Ready by 21™</p> <p><i>Forum for Youth Investment</i><sup>20,21</sup></p>                      | <p>Ready by 21 is a comprehensive approach to ensure that all young people are ready for college, work, and life. This approach recognizes that when youth are active in their communities, including religious institutions, they are developing skills; connections to family, schools, and community; and positive social norms that set the foundation for them succeed as young adults in their early 20s.</p>   |

## APPENDIX B: Hallmarks of High-Quality Service-Learning Programs

Well-designed and -implemented service-learning programs have the greatest impact on youth outcomes. As previously noted, service-learning programs achieve the best outcomes when they have:

- Youth leadership and direction.
- Opportunities for parent and family engagement.

Based on a comparison of youth outcomes, Billig found high-quality service-learning programs had the following elements.

- Youth planning the experiences with adult facilitating their role as decision makers.
- Direct contact with service recipients.
- Longer lasting service-learning programs.
- Teacher experience with service-learning.
- Linkage to standards.
- Clear educational and service goals.
- High expectations.
- Cognitive and developmental challenges for participants.
- Use of assessment to enhance student learning and monitor achievement.
- Connected to genuine school and community needs.
- Use of formative and summative evaluation of process and outcomes.
- Community communication and interaction.
- Preparation of students for service work.
- Structured student reflection to encourage critical thinking.
- Validation of participants' service work.

- Caring relationships.<sup>3,4</sup>

Many of the organizations listed in the resources section and some of the publications listed in the endnotes provide additional guidance. Also, *Family Strengthening in Youth Development*, published by the Family Strengthening Policy Center, offers a toolbox of organizational strategies for promoting family engagement ([www.nasassembly.org/fspc/practice/practices.html](http://www.nasassembly.org/fspc/practice/practices.html)).

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**This series of policy briefs produced by the Family Strengthening Policy Center** seeks to describe a new way of thinking about how to strengthen families raising children in low-income communities and how this approach can and should influence policy. The premise of "family strengthening" in this context, and as championed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is that children do well when cared for by supportive families, which, in turn, do better when they live in vital and supportive communities. The series describes ways in which enhancing connections within families and between families and the institutions that affect them result in better outcomes for children *and* their families.

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This brief reflects the findings and views of the Family Strengthening Policy Center, which is solely responsible for its content. For more information or to access other family strengthening policy briefs, visit [www.nassembly.org/fspc](http://www.nassembly.org/fspc).

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