Engaged *for* Success

Service-Learning as a Tool for
High School Dropout Prevention

A Report by Civic Enterprises in association with
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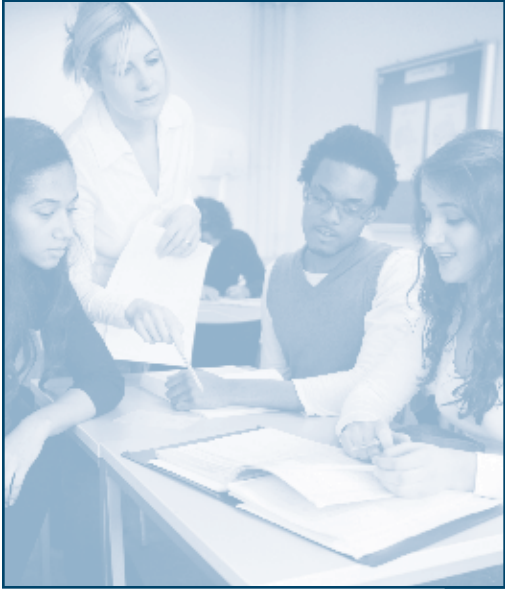National Conference on Citizenship

John M. Bridgeland
John J. DiIulio, Jr.
Stuart C. Wulsin

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Executive Summary

The promise of a nation rests in its youngest generation. The skills they develop, the habits they form, and the communities they build will determine the future of the nation and hold the keys to its progress. All of America's institutions – neighborhoods, schools, places of worship, workplaces, and our democracy itself – are enriched by well educated people with skills to contribute to their communities and country.

With these goals in mind – to engage children in education and prepare them to address our nation's challenges – two reports released in 2006 cast a dispiriting light on the reality facing our country. The first report, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, highlighted the fact that almost one-third of all public high school students – and nearly 50 percent of minorities – fail to graduate with their class. Academic failure was not the principal cause – 70 percent of the students reported that they did not see the real-world applications of their schoolwork and nearly half felt bored by their classes. More than 80 percent of students believed that if schools provided opportunities for real-world learning – such as service-learning, work study, and internships – these opportunities would improve students' chances of graduating from high school.

The second report, *America's Civic Health Index,* measured 40 indicators of the nation's civic health over the last 30 years. The most dramatic divides in civic health related to levels of education. College graduates outperform their less educated peers in every civic category, from volunteering and work on community projects to attending meetings and voting. For the most part, high school dropouts are no longer even a part of the civil society that would enable them to be effective advocates in their communities and states for efforts to reform high schools. They suffer both from a lack of learning and a lack of service.

One strategy has the potential to address both of these issues: service-learning. More specialized than just community service, service-learning involves applying classroom learning through investigation of a community problem, planning ways to solve it, action through service, reflection on the experience and what was learned, and demonstration of results. Effective service-learning is integrated into the curriculum, involves cognitively challenging reflection activities, incorporates students' voices in decision making, fosters diversity, includes monitoring of progress, has a significant duration, develops reciprocal partnerships with community organizations, and requires students to participate in meaningful service. This report suggests that service-learning could be a promising way to not only stem the tide of dropouts, but create a new generation of youth who are academically prepared for success in college and who possess a strong sense of civic responsibility.

Despite the promise and growth of service-learning over the last two decades, there remains a persistent gap

between the number of students who want service-learning opportunities and the number who have access to them, and this gap is largest for minority students. Good research has been conducted on the outcomes of service-learning, but there has been little research on the direct effect that it has on high school graduation rates. This report does not present conclusive evidence that service-learning has raised graduation rates, but rather offers new findings that demonstrate that service-learning can play a major role in keeping students engaged in school and on track to graduate.

This report presents original and secondary research that shows the ability of service-learning to address some of the principle causes of dropping out. It highlights findings from a nationally representative survey of 807 high school students, including 151 at-risk students, who share their views of service-learning. The report also examines the results of focus groups of service-learning teachers who provide specific examples of the ways in which service-learning has affected their students, as well as interviews with current students who offer their perspectives on service-learning programs. And the report draws upon research from a comprehensive national literature review, which found that service-learning improves almost every aspect of education that has an effect on graduation rates.

Service-learning holds the potential to address each of the underlying causes of low graduation rates, while incorporating the strategies most recommended for preventing students from dropping out.

The Potential to Increase Student Attendance and Engagement

Service-learning holds the potential to increase the attendance and engagement of students in classrooms and schools. Patterns of attendance are some of the strongest indicators of overall student engagement and significant predictors of dropping out.

■ **82 percent of students who participate in service-learning, and 80 percent of at-risk**

students not in service-learning programs, say their feelings about attending high school became or would become more positive as a result of service-learning. In focus groups, teachers highlighted the value of service-learning in increasing school and classroom attendance, and other studies have shown that high quality service-learning programs have a significant impact on student attendance.

■ **More than 75 percent of all students, including current and past students in service-learning programs, and at-risk students who did not participate in service-learning, agree that service-learning classes are more interesting than other classes.** Service-learning helps to keep students engaged by offering hands-on applications of curricular lessons, using real-world experiences to make school relevant.

■ **Forty-five percent of service-learning students, including 38 percent of at-risk students who were not in service-learning programs, believe service-learning classes are more worthwhile than other classes.** Only 3 percent of all students found them less worthwhile, while 52 percent said that service-learning classes are as worthwhile as other classes.

The Promise of Service-Learning in Fostering Motivation and Achievement

Service-learning engages students in classroom learning in ways that foster academic achievement and increase motivation to learn.

■ **Seventy-seven percent of students in service-learning programs, and 66 percent of at-risk students who did not participate in service-learning programs, say that service-learning had or would have had a big effect on motivating them to work hard.** Sixty-five percent of all students believe their motivation would increase if classes connected learning with opportunities to serve in communities.

- **Other research shows that service-learning can help increase students' self-confidence, leadership skills, and sense of empowerment.**

- **Secondary research shows that service-learning can improve academic performance** by improving test scores, homework completion, and grades, and can reduce the achievement gap between minority and majority students. Teachers explained in the focus groups that service-learning especially helps those who are not best served by the traditional classroom environment.

- **Other studies also show that service-learning can improve student behavior,** refocusing the school environment on learning while reducing the distractions caused by disruptive behavior.

Making Service-Learning More Widely Available as a Dropout Prevention Tool

Service-learning alone cannot solve the complex problem of high school dropout, but it can be a powerful tool to help address many of the warning signs that signal students are on track to leave school – absenteeism, lack of motivation, lack of engagement in classroom learning, and lack of connection to real-world opportunities. Students themselves believe service-learning would be a powerful tool to prevent high school dropout and want more access to service-learning opportunities.

- **Seventy-four percent of African Americans, 70 percent of Hispanics, and 64 percent of all students said that service-learning could have a big effect on keeping dropouts in school.** More than half of all at-risk students (53%) believed that service-learning could have this effect.

- **Eighty-three percent of all students, 90 percent of African Americans, 83 percent of Hispanics, and 81 percent of whites, said they would definitely or probably enroll in service-learning classes if they were offered at their school. At the same time, only 16 percent of students said that their school was offering such classes.** Interestingly, 30 percent

of schools offer service-learning, according to a survey of principals, implying that even in schools with service-learning most students either lack access to the classes or do not know about them. At low-performing schools, only 8 percent of students say their school offers service-learning classes. The high school dropout epidemic disproportionately affects minority students, the very students who express the strongest interest in service-learning.

Policy Pathways

Service-learning programs have received increasing support at the local, state and federal levels over the last two decades and such programs have become more common in our nation's schools. But such public policy support has waxed and waned in recent years and service-learning has not grown enough in quality and reach to meet its potential to address the dropout challenge and fulfill the appetite among students and teachers for more opportunities. This report recommends the following policy pathways to strengthen and enhance service-learning in schools across the country.

Increased Research on Service-Learning and Graduation Rates. There is a growing body of excellent research that documents the academic, civic, social, and personal value of service-learning for participants and that pinpoints quality practices. But there are no studies that specifically investigate how and why service-learning is related to graduation rates, other than those that presume a relationship based on mediating factors or simply draw correlations between the presence of service-learning and the decline of dropout rates.

As rigorous studies are conducted to determine the extent to which high quality service-learning programs can increase high school graduation rates, government and private funders should support pilot tests of high quality service-learning programs as a dropout prevention strategy and integrate such efforts in the national movement underway to increase high

school graduation rates. Experimental design with random assignment would be most rigorous, and interventions should be studied at both the middle and high school levels.

States should also begin collecting data on service-learning programs and using it to evaluate the effectiveness of such programs in boosting academic engagement and achievement. States should offer awards to teachers who lead excellent service-learning programs, and should offer professional development and resources for teachers who need additional help.

Expanded Access to High Quality Service-Learning. The U.S. Department of Education and state departments of education across the country should work to expand access to service-learning for every student. School districts, states, and the federal government should work to find additional sources of funding for service-learning in order to facilitate its widespread adoption. The Learn and Serve America program at the Corporation for National and Community Service should have, as one of its clear goals for the spread of service-learning programs, the use of service-learning for reducing high school dropout. AmeriCorps and federal work-study should make service-learning as a dropout prevention strategy a key component of their programs. States, with matching contributions from the private sector, should offer grants to schools for service-learning projects. Some of this funding should be designated for a Youth Innovation Fund that would provide resources for student-conceived projects in order to empower students as they address community problems.

Every school district should have a service-learning coordinator in charge of helping

> **One teacher from Kansas City said, "I would absolutely think that service-learning impacts attendance, because it goes back to if they're doing something that they enjoy."**

teachers implement effective programs. These coordinators should seek to identify students at risk of dropping out and encourage them to enroll in classes with service-learning. School districts can also incorporate service-learning into culminating projects at transition periods, especially at the end of middle school and the beginning of high school. Service experiences should be documented through civic transcripts, included with every graduate's academic transcript.

Capture the Spirit of Service-Learning through National Dialogue. The vast majority of students and schools do not yet know what service-learning actually is. Leaders should convene working sessions around a discussion of how best to reflect to the public, students, teachers, and policymakers the core values, principles, practices, and benefits of service-learning.

Educators, the service-learning community, non-profit leaders, and policymakers should begin an active dialogue around the power and relevance of service-learning in addressing the high school dropout crisis. National, state and local conferences, congressional hearings in the context of both dropout legislation and service-learning programs, and public forums in schools and communities all across America should be undertaken to further invest leaders in better understanding the dropout epidemic and the promise of service-learning.

This report is not the final word on the relationship between service-learning and dropout prevention, but the beginning of what we hope will be a national dialogue. In all of these discussions, the voices of students and teachers should inform the national debate and discussion around the power of service-learning in the education of our nation's children.

Engaged for Success

Our Failing Schools

A high school dropout epidemic exists in America with dangerous consequences to individuals, the economy, and our nation. In 2003, nearly one-third of all public high school students and almost 50 percent of minorities failed to graduate with their class. In that same year, 3.5 million youth ages 16 to 25 did not have a high school diploma and were not enrolled in school.[1] This cycle of disengagement from the institutions designed to foster equal opportunity has tragic results.

Dropping out negatively affects individuals. High school dropouts, on average, earn about $1 million less over a lifetime than college graduates. Students who drop out of high school are often unable to support themselves – high school dropouts were over three times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed in 2004. They are twice as likely as high school graduates to slip into poverty from one year to the next. And at every age range, dropouts are less healthy than their better educated peers.[2]

The prevalence of high dropout rates also impacts our economy, communities, and nation. The State of California, for instance, loses about 46 billion dollars a year because of high school dropouts.[3] A dropout is more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison as a person with at least a high school diploma; four out of ten adults ages 16 to 24 who lack a high school diploma received some type of government assistance in 2001; and the lifetime cost to the nation for each youth who drops out and later moves into a life of crime ranges from

> A social studies teacher from Mesa, Arizona, saw the important role service-learning played in the life of one of her students who participated in an aerosol arts group to paint murals on campus and at the Arizona Department of Health: "As far as this young man goes, he wasn't doing anything in his classes and was probably on a good line for dropping out and not finishing high school." With the motivation of the service-learning, however, he graduated from high school.

$1.7 to $2.3 million.[4] According to the 2006 Civic Health Index, while 62 percent of college graduates vote, only 31 percent of high school dropouts vote. College graduates are four times as likely to volunteer as dropouts, and twice as likely to engage in public work in their communities.[5]
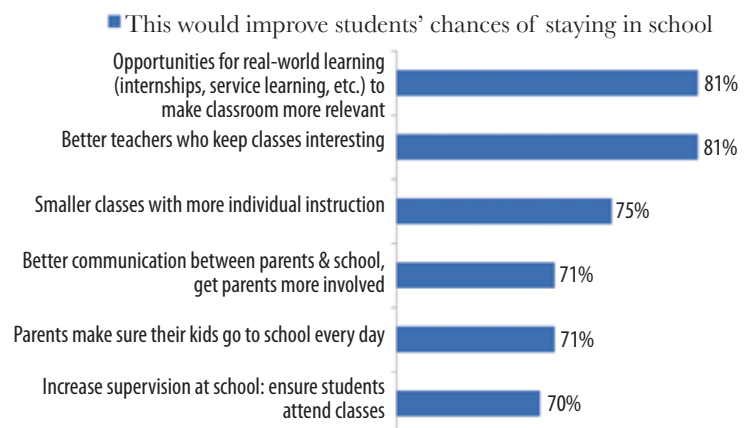
Causes of Dropout

When asked why they dropped out of school, students surveyed for *The Silent Epidemic* offered a variety of answers, and many offered multiple explanations. The most common explanation, which 47 percent of dropouts offered, was that classes were not interesting. Forty-three percent said that they missed too many days and could not catch up, 42 percent said they spent time with people who were not interested in school, 38 percent said that they had too much freedom and not enough rules in their lives, and 35 percent said that they were failing in school. These findings upended the conventional wisdom that kids dropped out of school because they failed, were expelled, or became distracted by drugs or unplanned parenthood. Of those reasons, only failing was cited as one of the top five reasons for dropping out, and only by 35 percent of dropouts. Life events, such as becoming a parent, were cited by less than one-third of dropouts. Seventy percent of dropouts report confidence that they could have graduated from high school. What really drove the students away was a lack of interest in the classes they were attending.

Students Identify Ways Schools Could Improve

When asked what would improve the chance of success for high school students, the dropouts surveyed for *The Silent Epidemic* offered some useful recommendations. Eighty-one percent of the dropouts said that schools should offer more real-world learning experiences, such as internships and service-learning. The same number also said that better teachers who keep classes interesting would improve students' chances of staying in school. Slightly fewer students cited smaller classes, better communication between parents and school, increased supervision at school, and parents making sure their children go to school each day.

The high school students surveyed for this report offered a similar understanding of what schools need to do in order to improve: make classes interesting, relevant, and hands-on. Overall, 79 percent of students say making academic classes more interesting would have a very or fairly big effect in helping them get the most out of their high school experience. Seventy-eight percent said the same thing about making courses more relevant to their future, and 77 percent felt that way about making classes more hands-on. For at-risk students, those who said they could do much better or somewhat better in school and

Figure 1: What Dropouts Believe Would Improve Students' Chances

■ This would improve students' chances of staying in school

Opportunities for real-world learning (internships, service learning, etc.) to make classroom more relevant	81%
Better teachers who keep classes interesting	81%
Smaller classes with more individual instruction	75%
Better communication between parents & school, get parents more involved	71%
Parents make sure their kids go to school every day	71%
Increase supervision at school: ensure students attend classes	70%

Source: *The Silent Epidemic*, 2006

described their school as average or below-average in terms of the level of achievement and the percent of students who go on to college, the most common response was making classes more hands-on, which 75 percent said would have a very or fairly big effect in helping them get the most out of their high school experience. Seventy-three percent of at-risk students felt that way about making classes more interesting, and 68 percent felt school should make courses more relevant to their future.

Policy Solutions

The Silent Epidemic concludes that increasing graduation rates requires directly addressing the issues that usually lead students to drop out. The report outlines strategies that can help increase graduation rates:

- Improve teaching and curricula to make school more relevant and engaging and enhance the connections between school and work;

- Improve instruction and access to supports for struggling students;

- Build a school climate that fosters academics;

- Ensure strong adult-student relationships within the school; and

- Improve the communication between parents and schools.

As will be shown, service-learning has the potential to address all of these recommendations.
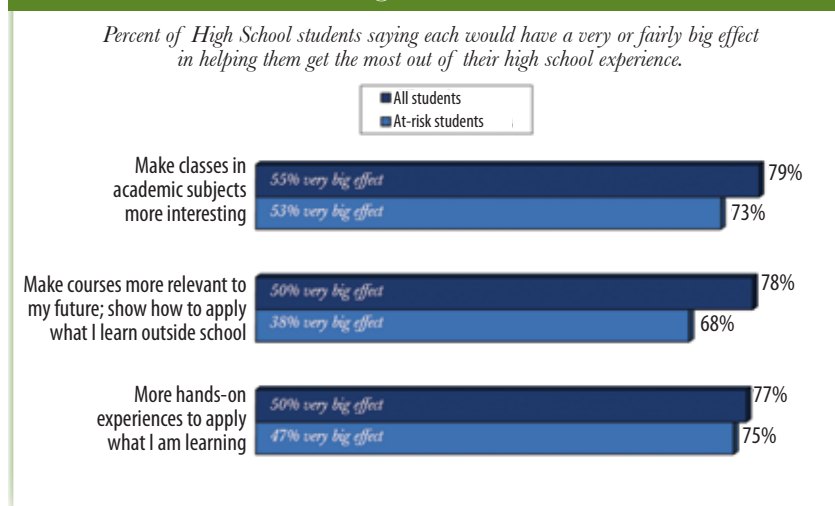
SERVICE-LEARNING IN OUR SCHOOLS

Service-learning is an educational technique that incorporates community service into the academic curriculum. Service-learning differs from generic community service in that it has specific academic goals, is organized through schools, and involves reflection activities for the participants. Service-learning can take many forms, from individual projects in which students write children's books about historical events and then read them to younger students, to group activities in which an entire class paints a mural depicting themes from their science class. While only two percent of schools had service-learning programs in 1984,[6] approximately 30 percent of schools have service-learning today.[7] Officials estimate that about 4.7 million students are engaged in service-learning each year.[8]

The Need for Increased Access and Awareness

Students see the value of service-learning. While 64 percent of students report that their schools have community service programs, only 16 percent of students (and only eight percent of students in low-performing schools[9]) report that they have service-learning in their school. This "community service – service-learning access gap" appears even though all students, including at-risk students, consistently rank components of service-learning – such as the development of leadership skills, teaching how to be an involved citizen, working with others to address public issues, and making courses relevant to everyday life in communities – as more important to getting the most out of their high school experience than being

Figure 2: Helping Students Get More Out Of High School

Percent of High School students saying each would have a very or fairly big effect in helping them get the most out of their high school experience.

Legend:
- All students
- At-risk students

Make classes in academic subjects more interesting
- 55% very big effect — 79%
- 53% very big effect — 73%

Make courses more relevant to my future; show how to apply what I learn outside school
- 50% very big effect — 78%
- 38% very big effect — 68%

More hands-on experiences to apply what I am learning
- 50% very big effect — 77%
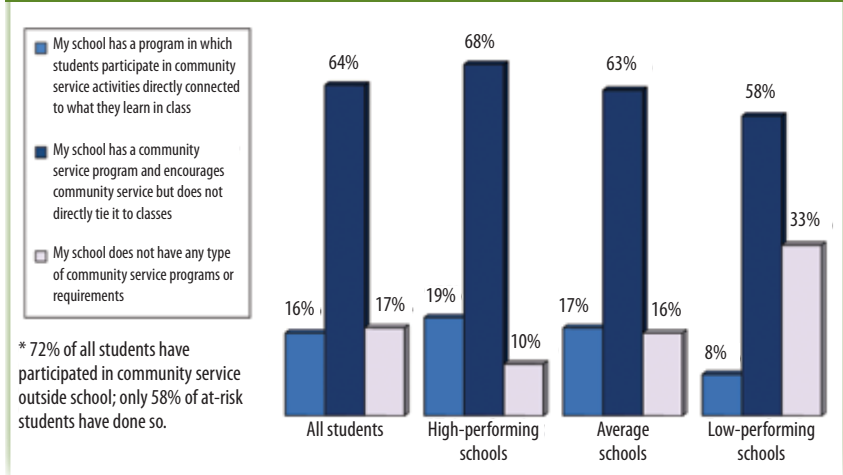- 47% very big effect — 75%

involved with community service. Four out of ten at-risk students believe service-learning is more worthwhile, and much more interesting, than other classes without service-learning. When asked directly, 65 percent of all students find service-learning appealing, including nearly half of all at-risk students. African American students report the highest level of appeal for service-learning at 70 percent, compared with 66 percent of white students and 58 percent of Hispanics.

Notwithstanding these favorable views of service-learning, too many students know little about it. Although at-risk students agree with all students that school needs to be more interesting, relevant, and hands on, they are far less likely to know about service-learning programs at their school. When given a description of service-learning, 49 percent of all students say they are familiar with its idea. By contrast, only 33 percent of at-risk students say that they are familiar with service-learning. Similarly, students from low-performing schools are just half as likely to say that their school has a service-learning program as all students. These figures are well below the figures from a survey of principals, which show that about 30 percent of schools have service-learning programs,[10] implying that even at schools with service-learning, many students do not know that the programs exist.

Among the students who say their school has community service, 60 percent participate in those programs. For at-risk students in that group, however, only 44 percent participate. The students who stand to gain the most from service-learning, at-risk students and those at low-performing schools, too often do not have access to, or do not know about, community service and service-learning programs at their schools.

Figure 3: Community Service Programs In Schools

- My school has a program in which students participate in community service activities directly connected to what they learn in class
- My school has a community service program and encourages community service but does not directly tie it to classes
- My school does not have any type of community service programs or requirements

* 72% of all students have participated in community service outside school; only 58% of at-risk students have done so.

All students: 16%, 64%, 17%
High-performing schools: 19%, 68%, 10%
Average schools: 17%, 63%, 16%
Low-performing schools: 8%, 58%, 33%

Aspects of Highly Effective Service-Learning

Because service-learning is different in every classroom in which it is used, the effectiveness of the programs varies widely. While some service-learning programs produce impressive positive results, poorly designed or poorly implemented activities can distract teachers and students from learning without furthering any educational goals. A national team of service-learning professionals, convened by the National Youth Leadership Council, has assembled a list of effective practices in service-learning. Based on research findings and the experiences of leading practitioners, the team identified eight principles of high-quality programs.[11]

Service-learning is most effective when it is well integrated into the curriculum. This integration is the key difference between service-learning and community service. Rather than simply having students work in their communities, service-learning ties that work to the academic material being taught in class. This curricular integration is enhanced by reflection activities like group discussions and journaling that challenge students to think critically about their experiences. This reflection is best when it takes place before, during, and after the service.[12]

Also essential to high quality service-learning is the youth voice. Students are best served when they play a significant role in identifying the community problem they want to address, designing the service initiative, and carrying it out. Key to good service-learning is the meaningfulness of the service. Researcher Shelley Billig describes meaningfulness as, "substantive but not overwhelming; framing the activities so they have clear relevance to students' lives; elaborating beyond information in textbooks; explicitly connecting to previous experiences; and providing activities characterized as having 'high academic press.'"[13] Duration matters, and service-learning projects should take place during concrete blocks of time over the course of several weeks or months in order to maximize their effects. In addition, service-learning instructors should incorporate regular progress monitoring and build reciprocal partnerships with community organizations.

While teachers in charge of service-learning need not fulfill each of these criteria in order for service-learning to be meaningful, doing so will maximize the impact of the program on the students participating in it. Service-learning initiatives that incorporate these key characteristics can have a powerful effect on the very factors that are known to increase high school graduation rates.

STUDENT VOICE **"Service-learning makes me want to come to school, because it's not the same thing all the time."**

The Nature of Service-Learning Matters

Reflecting the finding that students want their schools to be more interesting, relevant, and hands-on, service-learning projects that involve more direct involvement by students receive more support from students. During our survey, students heard descriptions of a variety of possible service-learning projects and were asked whether the projects sounded interesting. Their responses varied widely.

Seventy-six percent of students said that a project sounded interesting in which biology students at a school near a toxic waste site conducted sophisticated water monitoring, analyzed fish and plant samples, learned research methods, and increased awareness of lead poisoning in the community. By contrast, only 51 percent said the same about a project in which social studies students from a neighborhood underrepresented in the U.S. census learned about the importance of the census, developed strategies to ensure neighborhoods were fully counted, then designed informational brochures, conducted a media campaign, and canvassed the neighborhood. We note that the first project involving biology students had three key elements – direct relevance to classroom learning, a clear and interesting academic nexus, and hands-on opportunities to merge classroom learning with practical experience.

This finding supports the argument that service-learning must be well-designed, and ideally involve the input of students in its design and implementation. Student leadership is the easiest way to make sure the project is interesting to students.

Principles for Effective Practice for K-12 Service-Learning (Weah, 2007)	
1.	Curricular Integration
2.	Meaningful Service
3.	Cognitively Challenging Reflection
4.	Progress Monitoring
5.	Youth Voice
6.	Duration & Intensity
7.	Diversity
8.	Reciprocal Relationships

PREVENTING DROPOUT WITH SERVICE-LEARNING

The epidemic of students dropping out of high school has many underlying causes, which are different for each student. Causes vary from passively fading out to actively being expelled, from struggling academically because of poor academic training to being too smart for classes the student finds boring. For nearly every cause of dropping out, however, service-learning has the potential to make a meaningful difference.

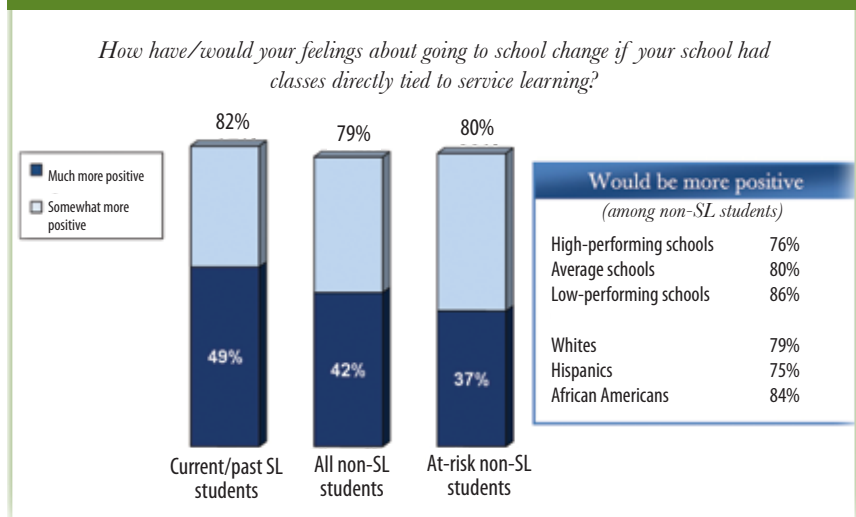### Lack of Connection to the School Environment

Too many high school students feel disconnected from their school, and this lack of connection is a primary factor in their failure to graduate. *The Silent Epidemic* found that dropping out of high school is a slow process that involves gradual disengagement from the school community. One of the primary warning signs for future dropouts is poor attendance. Clear warning signs such as missing class or skipping school often appear at least one to three years before a student drops out, and some national studies show that such signals can be predictive of dropping out as early as elementary school. Between 59 and 65 percent of high school dropouts missed class often during the year they dropped out, and 33 to 45 percent missed class often the previous year.[14] Furthermore, students who eventually dropped out report that they often lack adult role models at school with whom they can discuss school or personal problems. Fostering a school environment in which students feel they can turn to teachers and want to go to school is a crucial step toward keeping students in school and on track to graduate. Students,

teachers, and published research explain that service-learning can effectively build a positive learning environment while improving attendance.

The survey of students for this report indicates that service-learning would improve attendance. Eighty-two percent of students said that their feelings toward school would be more positive if they had more classes that incorporated service-learning. These findings were consistent across all students – current and former students in service-learning programs, all students not in service-learning programs, and at-risk students not in service-learning programs. This figure is highest for students at low-performing schools (86 percent) and for African Americans (84 percent).

In focus groups of service-learning instructors conducted for this report, teachers described the ways in which service-learning improves the school community. Two teachers explained that service-learning strengthens relationships between students and teachers. The first teacher said, "I think part of it is that because we are connected to the kids, they're also using us as a resource and an advisor. So students that you wouldn't necessarily see will knock on your door if they're having a problem. I think that they use the teacher, not necessarily their academic teachers, as a resource. And also sometimes, it's a guide for somebody to talk to." A former French

Figure 4: Service-Learning Has Potential To Improve Attendance

How have/would your feelings about going to school change if your school had classes directly tied to service learning?

■ Much more positive
□ Somewhat more positive

	Current/past SL students	All non-SL students	At-risk non-SL students
Total	82%	79%	80%
Much more positive	49%	42%	37%

Would be more positive
(among non-SL students)

High-performing schools	76%
Average schools	80%
Low-performing schools	86%
Whites	79%
Hispanics	75%
African Americans	84%

teacher from Chicago explained, "I have a small group of kids that I work with in a service-learning class, and some of those kids are definitely improved because it's one on one. I know them. They know me. They get to know their teacher in a different way, and I think that they know I'm looking out for them, and if they screw up, I'm going to know. So I think that helps them."

Teachers also described service-learning's ability to expose students to diversity and help overcome prejudices. One teacher from New York who has been practicing service-learning for six years explained, "There are so many stereotypes that I think service-learning helps to break down." Another teacher described a special education student who has struggled with classes and is one of few minorities in the school: "He's hooked up with two of our top students who are good kids, and they've become this little team that goes out and does all these things together. And I think it just has crossed some bridges and some boundaries that would not have happened without a service experience."

The most direct impact that service-learning has on preventing students from dropping out is by encouraging attendance. Teachers see a strong connection between service-learning and increased attendance. One teacher from Kansas City said, "I would absolutely think that it impacts attendance, because it goes back to if they're doing something that they enjoy." Another explained, "I think overall, the attendance has improved on days that class is doing service. I know in science, kids doing a service-learning project down there, they'll talk about, 'Oh, I've got to be here tomorrow' because we're going to go out to work with fifth-graders or whatever the project is at the time."

Past research supports the teachers' impressions that service-learning improves attendance. In a well-controlled study comparing students at an alternative school with a heavy focus on service with similar students at a tradi-

tional high school, researchers found that students at the service-focused school had half as many absences, on average, as the control students at the traditional high school.[15] Similarly, a comparison of students participating in the Community Based Learning Program (CBL) to a control group finds that during the year of participation, attendance of CBL students improved significantly while control group attendance stayed the same.[16] Other research shows that a comprehensive service-based intervention for at-risk 8th graders increased attendance from 48 percent among the control group to 84 percent among those in the program.[17]

Perception that School is Boring

The lack of connection to school is often the result of students thinking that school is boring. Students too often fail to see the relevance of their academic coursework to own their lives. When classes are too easy, students do not feel challenged and decide that their time would be better spent elsewhere. Most dropouts do not decide one day that they will give up on school. Rather, they slowly become disengaged, fading out over time.

To combat this phenomenon, schools must make their classes challenging, interesting, and relevant. By providing hands-on experience and showing the real-life application of course work, service-learning addresses this issue.

One teacher explained that service-learning allows students to learn life skills beyond the textbook. Another described how service-learning forces students to do many things at one time, helping prepare students for real life when they must combine the things they have learned. Other teachers described service-learning's ability to be hands-

> *STUDENT VOICE*
> **"It's a better experience because you're not in a class sitting down writing on the board. You're outside doing hands-on activities learning about what's around you."**

on, offer a sense of purpose, and make classes relevant. One teacher described how her students show up on days when they get to do service because it is their favorite day.

Teachers also say service-learning offers students skills for the future. A teacher who works with students from disadvantaged backgrounds sees the value of service-learning as a way to strengthen students' resumes and make them more competitive applicants for college admission. A teacher who has her students complete a campaign service project during elections feels that the experience exposes students to options for what they can do after high school.

These findings from interviews with teachers are supported by past research that shows that service-learning increases student engagement. A thorough evaluation of Learn and Serve America, which was formed in 1993 to provide federal support for schools and community organizations to increase community service among students, found that participation in Learn and Serve programs had a significant impact on the level of school engagement.[18] School engagement is the key to keeping students from dropping out of high school, and service-learning significantly helps foster it.

Among students who have participated, or are currently participating, in service-learning programs at their school, for each student who says it is less worthwhile than regular class, fifteen say it is more worthwhile. Although 52 percent say it is about the same as other classes, 45 percent say it is more worthwhile, and only 3 percent say it is less worthwhile. This implies that it can have a substantial impact on millions of students across the country. Similarly, 37 percent of service-learning students say it is much more interesting than other classes, while only 13 percent say it is less interesting.

Figure 5: Students Say Service-Learning Is Worthwhile

Are classes where what you learn is tied to community service more or less worthwhile than other classes?
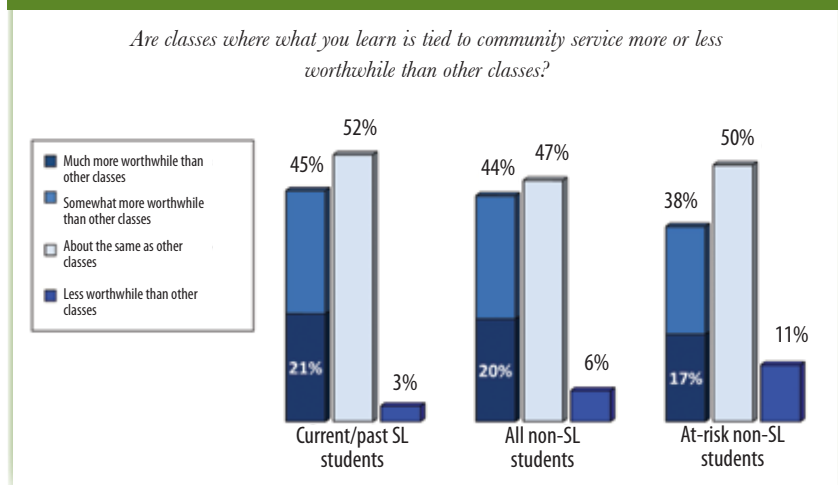
Among the students who said service-learning is more worthwhile than other classes, the most common explanation, given by 22 percent of respondents, was that service-learning gets students more involved in their community, caring for people, and making the world better. Fifteen percent of students said that service-learning is more worthwhile because it offers hands-on, real world experiences. Other reasons cited by a significant portion of students were that service-learning teaches more and makes classes better (11 percent), is more interesting and social (nine percent), and offers a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction (seven percent).

Lack of Motivation

Sixty-nine percent of dropouts say that they were not motivated or inspired to work hard in school.[19] This has many causes, including uninvolved parents (among dropouts whose parents were not involved, 78 percent were not motivated to work hard, compared with only 64 percent of dropouts whose parents were consistently involved), low expectations from teachers, and classes that are not challenging. When students do not feel like the adults around them expect them to succeed, they are far more likely to accept failure for themselves. How to motivate students is a question that every teacher faces and administrators struggle with on a daily basis. While there is no secret that will motivate all students to work

hard in school, teachers report that service-learning has the ability to motivate and inspire students while helping them develop personal skills.

One way in which service-learning benefits students is by helping build their self confidence and develop a sense of empowerment. One teacher explained, "Just the direct contact with other people is what makes it so meaningful. They like giving away what they've learned in school, and now they're giving it away to help a younger child. I think what also really appeals to them, and I don't know that they always express this, is that they know when they walk into the room they're as big as any pro athlete or famous singer." Another teacher agreed that service-learning opens students up for "real personal growth that builds self-confidence and self-worth." "It goes back to their core beliefs on who they are," explained a service-learning instructor. She continued, "Maybe at home in this situation, all they've been told is how rotten and horrible they are, and they can't do anything right. Then they get out there, and they start to get some perks and positive input from somebody. It makes them start to value themselves more."

A social studies teacher from Mesa, Arizona, saw the important role service-learning played in the life of one of her students who participated in an aerosol arts group to paint murals on campus and at the Arizona Department of Health: "As far as this young man goes, he wasn't doing anything in his classes and was probably on a good line for dropping out and not finishing high school." With the motivation of the service-learning, however, he graduated from high school.

Other studies support the claims that service-learning helps students' self confidence.[20] Students with increased confidence will be more likely to invest their time and energy in their schoolwork. Service-learning also helps motivate students by giving them ownership over a project, allowing them to work collaboratively with their

> *STUDENT VOICE*
> **"Service-learning motivates me to keep on going and to not be afraid to try new things."**

teacher, and by making classes relate to the world outside of school.

Increased self confidence, along with the deeper connections between adults and students fostered by service-learning, has the ability to not just motivate students but also to help them stay in school should major life events arise. Thirty-two percent of dropouts leave school to get a job, while 26 percent become parents and 22 percent have to help their family.[21] While the challenges of parenthood, caring for family members, and being financially independent are enormous and usually more difficult to handle while simultaneously attending school, students with strong self-esteem and with adults who provide guidance and support are more likely to be able to handle the demands of life in and out of school. Some life events are so extreme that no level of preparation, and certainly no amount of service-learning, would be enough to keep the student in school. Nonetheless, the personal skills that service-learning helps students develop would serve them well as they grapple with life's challenges.

In terms of service-learning's actual influence on student motivation, 77 percent of current and past service-learning students say that service-learning classes have a very or fairly big effect on motivating them to work hard and do their best in school. Even among at-risk students (who are the least motivated) who have not participated in service-learning, 69 percent said that service-learning would help motivate them to do their best in school.
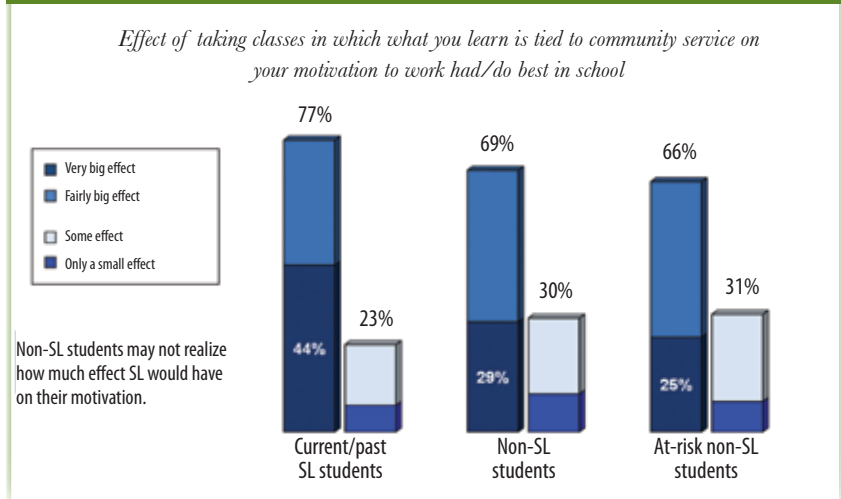
Academic Challenges

Some students do drop out because they are failing too many classes. Thirty-five percent of drop-outs report that they were "failing in school." On top of this, 57 percent say that it was difficult to pass from one grade to the next.[22] These academic difficulties result from poor preparation, teachers who are unavailable to offer extra help, boring classes, poor attendance, and a lack of homework. Academic problems often start early, as students are learning basic literacy and mathematics. Those who struggle with the basics find themselves overwhelmed later on. Service-learning can address the problem not just by encouraging higher levels of engagement and motivation, but also by presenting curricular lessons in new ways that are more accessible to students who struggle with traditional classroom instruction.

There is an abundance of anecdotal evidence to suggest that service-learning positively impacts academic performance. Teachers who run service-learning programs identify ways in which they positively affect students' academic performance. A teacher who has her English students write a children's book about a historical event they have researched said that her students learned better through that activity because it required them to conduct research and then apply what they learned in a creative way that they would remember. Sharing the book with younger students further reinforced the concepts by forcing the student-authors to explain the history as if they were teachers. "I know for a fact that for the first time, and I've been teaching English almost 30 years, those kids know that subject matter better than any other research paper they've done." Another teacher, who collects statistics on his students, found that service-learning

Figure 6: Service-Learning Motivates Students To Work Hard/Do Best

Effect of taking classes in which what you learn is tied to community service on your motivation to work had/do best in school

Non-SL students may not realize how much effect SL would have on their motivation.

had a highly significant effect on their academic performance. A teacher from Chicago agreed that service-learning improves students' grades.

Senator John Glenn, Chair of the National Commission on Service Learning, tells the story of how the lessons from a high school civics teacher and experiential learning would affect the rest of his life and spark his interest in both classroom learning and public service.

Service-learning also holds particular potential for students who do not normally thrive in the traditional classroom setting. A teacher explained: "I think one of the benefits of service-learning, as far as at-risk learners, is that you're providing a very different type of educational opportunity. So I think of my kinesthetic learners, my students who really can't stay in their seats for a 40-minute period, but who flourish when you tell them, 'you need to plant trees'. And they're the ones who are at the forefront, planting just hundreds in a day, because this is something where they know they can be successful."

Service-learning, when implemented effectively, can have a significant impact on academic performance, as these teachers described. This is confirmed by other research. Service-learning has been shown to raise students' grades,[23] improve scores on standardized tests,[24] increase rates of homework completion,[25] and reduce the achievement gap between white and minority students.[26]

Behavior

Disruptive behavior is a widespread problem at schools and affects graduation rates in two ways. Disruptive behavior leads to disciplinary actions, which can include suspension and expulsion, often driving students away from the high school. At the same time, an environment with bad behavior is not conducive to learning, forcing teachers to direct their focus on classroom management rather than academic content, leading students to lower levels of engagement and motivation. Strategies that improve the academic climate by fostering better behavior are likely to have a strong impact on keeping students in school through graduation. Sixty-two percent of dropouts say that more classroom discipline is necessary, and 57 percent say that schools need to do more to help prevent violence.[27]

A teacher whose school had many students with behavior problems credited service-learning with helping improve the academic climate and eliminate many of the discipline issues. This impression is supported by research that shows that service-learning improves student behavior. Other researchers calculate that participation in service activities lowers behavior problems by 15 percent.[28] They find this result for voluntary and required service, although they do not look specifically at service-learning. It is reasonable to assume, however, that the benefits from service would be present in a well-designed service-learning program. Others also find a significant effect of service-learning on lowering problem behavior among boys in service-learning programs.[29]

Overall Effect on Graduation

When asked what effect they think service-learning would have on keeping students from dropping out of school, 64 percent of students say that service-learning could have a fai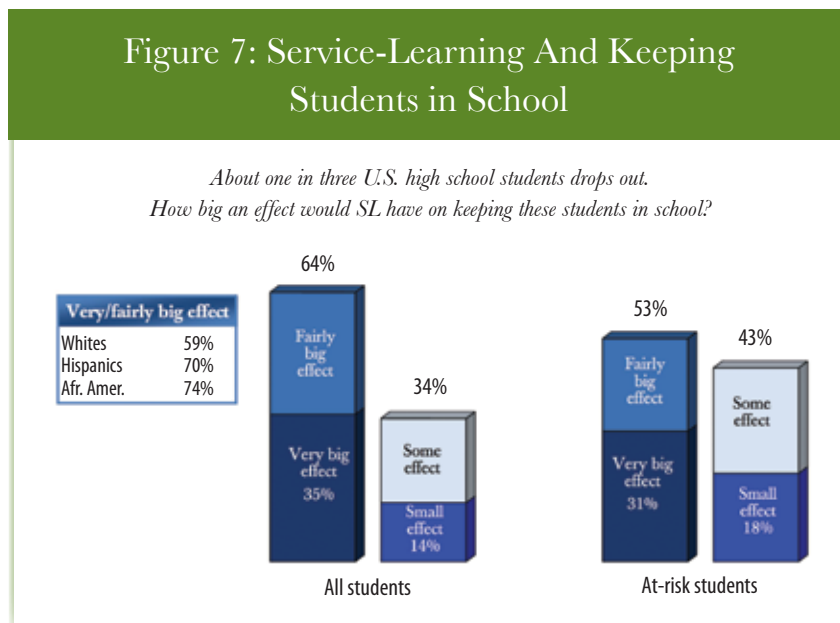rly or very big effect. This figure is much higher for Hispanics (70%) and African Americans (74%), among whom graduation rates are even lower than average.

In addition, students report that in addition to keeping them in school and improving their engagement in classroom learning, service-learning will increase the degree to which they become civically engaged in their communities.

POLICY PATHWAYS

Service-learning can be strengthened at the local, state, and federal levels in order to maximize its impact on keeping students engaged and succeeding in school. Although the direct effect of service-learning on high school graduation rates must still be verified through more studies, enough evidence already exists to demonstrate the ability of service-learning to improve engagement in school and academic achievement. We make the following recommendations and note that some of these policy pathways are the result of discussions with leaders from across America who participated in the National Service-Learning Action Forum at the College of William and Mary in March 2008.

Figure 7: Service-Learning And Keeping Students in School

About one in three U.S. high school students drops out. How big an effect would SL have on keeping these students in school?

Very/fairly big effect	
Whites	59%
Hispanics	70%
Afr. Amer.	74%

All students: 64% — Fairly big effect / Very big effect 35%; Some effect 34% / Small effect 14%

At-risk students: 53% — Fairly big effect / Very big effect 31%; Some effect 43% / Small effect 18%

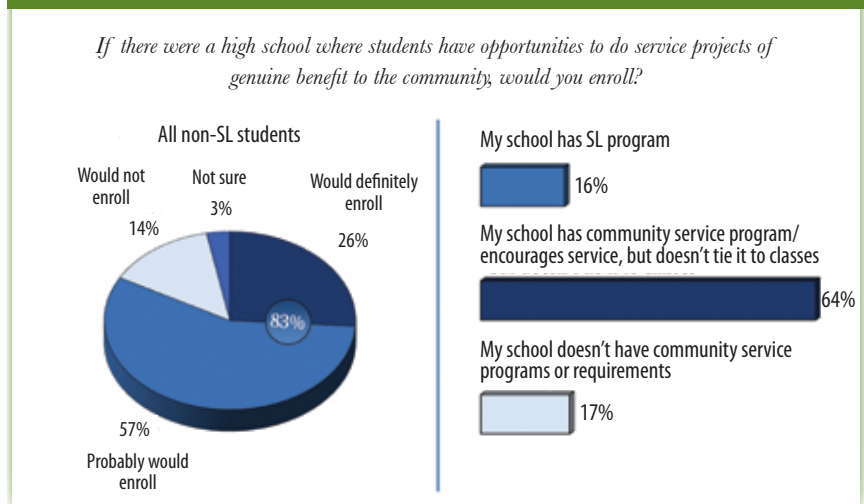All students   At-risk students

Local Level

Expanded Access. Although only 16 percent of students say their school offers service-learning, and less than 10 percent have participated themselves, 83 percent say they would probably or definitely enroll if their school were to offer such classes. The percent is the same for at-risk students, who show an equal appetite for service-learning and stand to gain the most from it. This enthusiasm should serve as a hopeful sign and a call to action. Students are ready to participate in service-learning; they just need to be given the opportunity.

One suggestion for how to strengthen access to service-learning is by incorporating it into culmination projects at transitional points in education. Transition years in school have been shown to be particularly disruptive, and more than 60 percent of dropouts nationwide leave school during 9th or 10th grade.[30] For those who drop out later, their disengagement from school often begins earlier, with patterns of attendance one of the strongest indicators of such disengagement. Stronger access to service-learning during the years leading up to high school and through the important transition year of 9th grade can be a tool to help keep students engaged in school and on a path for success through high school. Capstone projects that culminate a school year or mark the end of middle school or junior high are a way that schools could involve more students in meaningful service-learning. In expanding service-learning, teachers and administrators must make sure that they design the projects to incorporate the aspects that define high quality programs.

Service-Learning as an Early Intervention. In addition to the service-learning projects undertaken by every student, students

Figure 8: Most Schools Don't Offer Service-Learning

If there were a high school where students have opportunities to do service projects of genuine benefit to the community, would you enroll?

All non-SL students

Would not enroll 14%
Not sure 3%
Would definitely enroll 26%
83%
57% Probably would enroll

My school has SL program 16%

My school has community service program/ encourages service, but doesn't tie it to classes 64%

My school doesn't have community service programs or requirements 17%

who show warning signs of being at risk for dropping out should be directed toward service-learning classes. Research has shown that service-learning provides the kind of hands-on, relevant, and interesting educational experience that can motivate otherwise disengaged students to work harder. Students who have a high rate of absence, low levels of motivation, or behavior problems should be placed in service-learning classes where they can connect with teachers, see the importance of school, and take on leadership roles in addressing community problems.

Service-Learning Coordinators in Every School. Service-learning programs are harder to organize than traditional lessons, and teachers should not be expected to undertake such projects without additional resources. In 1999, only 3 percent of the schools with service-learning had a full-time service-learning coordinator. Only 11 percent reduced teachers' course loads to allow extra time for service-learning program development or supervision. And only 15 percent gave teachers extra planning time for service-learning activities.[31]

Service-learning coordinators can play a key role in supporting teachers as they implement effective service-learning. Each school should have at least one person who is in charge of service-learning, either a teacher who has

part-time responsibility for service-learning leadership and organizing, or a full-time coordinator.

Civic Transcripts. High schools recognize student academic achievement by awarding diplomas and providing transcripts that chronicle the academic experiences the student has had. Transcripts should include civic accomplishments, including the service and community activities in which the student engaged. These transcripts should not simply list the hours served, but should provide details on the service-learning projects, extracurricular community service activities, and summer service experiences that the student had. Schools can also make meaningful service a prerequisite for admission to National Honor Society and for graduating with Honors. Students with weaker academic performance should also be rewarded for their service, and students demonstrating high levels of civic engagement could be named Service-Learning Merit Scholars.

State Level

Leverage Private Funding. Research shows that for every dollar spent on service-learning projects, four dollars worth of service are provided to the community.[32] Service-learning also has been shown to have an impact on school attendance and academic achievement. Schools need money to help pay for the travel, supplies, and resources needed to make service-learning effective, both as a benefit to increased academic achievement and community renewal. States have an interest in both. Funding service-learning projects should be seen as an investment in the betterment of schools and communities throughout a state and the opportunity to pilot test various models, including efforts aimed directly at increasing high school graduation rates. As states develop their data systems to fulfill the promise of their 50-state compact on raising high school graduation rates, they have a greater stake in sparking innovation in more interventions, such as service-learning, that keep students

> ***STUDENT VOICE***
> **"Service-learning makes us think outside the box. There is more to learning than a textbook and a bunch of tests."**

engaged in the classroom and help them see the relevance of their schoolwork.

States should use their current service-learning budgets to leverage private philanthropy by offering to match private contributions to service-learning grant programs. The awarding of the grants should emphasize programs that adhere to proven standards of effective service-learning, and should encourage collaboration between schools and with community organizations.

Youth Innovation Fund. Research on service-learning highlights the importance of student reflection and student voice. We wonder whether states could play a more significant role in igniting the perspectives of young people in shaping their service learning projects. Part of the money states raise for service-learning might be dedicated to a Youth Innovation Fund that would provide start-up capital for service projects proposed by students themselves in order to empower students to take action to address the problems they see. Students are often capable of identifying problems in their communities that need to be addressed and devising plans that would effectively correct them. Youth Innovation Funds would encourage them to do so by providing the resources needed to put their ideas into action. We also believe such models should be tested to determine the impact such elements have on keeping students more engaged in classroom learning and school itself.

Encourage Teachers to Implement Service-Learning. States have a number of ways in which they can encourage teachers to use service-learning as part of their instruction. States should offer professional development classes for teachers in how to use service-learning effectively. This should be done in conjunction with higher education institu-

Spotlight on Capstone Projects

At César Chávez Public Charter School for Public Policy in Washington, DC, students spend the last three weeks of the school year participating in a Capstone project. In 9th and 10th grades, the Capstone is a teacher-led group project, while 11th graders pursue an independent internship.

One group of ninth grade students was organized by the school librarian, who, along with another teacher, helped his students learn about the local debate about the dilapidated central library and whether it should be renovated or replaced. As part of their investigation, the students visited neighborhood libraries in their own communities and in affluent parts of town that they had never visited. The students had the opportunity to meet and talk to a newspaper reporter, the Chief of Staff of the Chairman of the City Council, librarians, and local business leaders. The students were given the opportunity to propose a solution and come up with a strategy to implement it.

After heated discussion, the ninth grade students decided that they wanted to push for a new library to be built, and that they would testify at a public hearing on the issue. They chose three from among them to prepare testimony, and together they went to City Hall for the hearing. Although they were not expecting to be asked questions after their testimony, the Chairman asked them if they used their local library branch and what problems they found there. One of the students answered that "my Anacostia branch has been closed for the last two years and no renovation has started!" Shortly thereafter, the public library dispatched a book mobile to the neighborhood.

The library project is a good example of a successful capstone because it includes many of the elements of highly effective service-learning projects

and it produced most of the outcomes discussed in this report.

The students kept journals through the project, and were required to write in them every day. In addition, the group discussed each activity and reflected on what they had learned and observed. The students had significant say in what they would do, choosing to testify before the hearing, picking the students who would speak, and deciding what they wanted to say. The work felt meaningful to the ninth-graders, and had meaningful impact. Furthermore, the project lasted over 100 hours, offering a depth that is essential to effective projects.

The main way in which the library project differed from the most effective service-learning is that it was not integrated into the curriculum. Although the teachers in charge taught the students as they worked on the project, the experience was designed to stand alone and thus had fewer direct academic effects.

Nonetheless, the library project proved to be very effective. The students who participated in it reported developing stronger relationships with their teachers and being more willing to go to them for help after the project. They also said that their attendance improved during the project because they enjoyed going to school to work on something so engaging. They applauded the hands-on nature of the activities, saying that it felt like it really applied to their lives and was relevant. They also reported high levels of motivation to work hard throughout the three weeks.

The students who participated in the library project said that although a capstone would not be able to keep students in school who had to drop out to get a job or have a child, it could encourage students to come back to school and give them a reason to stay through graduation.

tions, and can also be facilitated through online classes that introduce teachers to service-learning.

A state-wide collection of service-learning curricula made available to all teachers through an online clearinghouse would make planning easier for teachers. Teachers could upload their own lesson plans, comment on each others' plans, and download the ones that seem most helpful. The clearinghouse could also provide links to other resources that teachers would find useful in creating service-learning programs, such as sources of funding, research on best practices, and community organizations willing to serve as partners.

Collect good data. Effectively improving schools and helping communities through service-learning requires accurate information on what works and what does not. States should collect data on service-learning programs and use it to evaluate the effectiveness of programs. When a service-learning program is seen to falter, teachers should be pointed toward additional resources to help them improve their projects. At the same time, states should recognize high-quality programs through annual awards that highlight students and teachers who have had an important impact.

Build Strong Partnerships. Given the benefits of service-learning on communities and schools, states should work to build partnerships between the groups who have a stake in high-quality service-learning. School districts, colleges and universities, youth engagement organizations, community groups, and local governments should work together to make service-learning meaningful for the students and beneficial for the communities. Service-learning works best when it involves reciprocal relationships, and states can work to encourage such cooperation.

Federal Level

Increased Research. There is a growing body of excellent research that documents the academic, civic, social, and personal benefits for participants in service-learning and that pinpoints quality practices. But there are no studies that specifically investigate how and why service-learning is related to graduation rates, other than

those that presume a relationship based on mediating factors or simply draw correlations between the presence of service-learning and the decline of dropout rates. As service-learning is adopted as an essential tool for preventing students from dropping out of school, additional research must be conducted to assess whether the new strategies are successful.

Well-designed research will measure graduation rates for groups of similar students who did and did not participate in service-learning. Although it is difficult to control for all variables, especially as schools implement more reforms, a rigorous research method should be able to reveal the effects that service-learning has on graduation rates.

One way to conduct such a study would be to select a handful of districts around the country that currently have dropout rates at or above the national average and are generally representative of the nation. The group of districts should include rural, suburban, and urban schools, including those with large and small minority populations. Once the schools are selected, a random set of middle school students (large enough in number to offer statistical validity—probably at least 20 percent of the school) should be assigned to rigorous, high-quality service-learning classes. These students should participate in service-learning classes throughout high school. After five years, researchers could count the number of students who graduated on time and compare it with the graduation rate for the rest of the school. While this study would not prove the effectiveness of all service-learning programs in all school environments, it would provide useful evidence for the effect of service-learning on graduation rates.

Married with the existing movement, represented by more than 100 dropout summits in all 50 states over the next few years, schools with some of the highest dropout rates should experiment with high quality service-learning programs to see what concrete effects there may be, when coupled with other supports for struggling students, in keeping more students engaged in classes and school. Students who are identified as at-risk for dropping out could be referred to service-learning programs as an early

intervention and students in these programs should be compared to students without access to them.

Channel Federal Resources to Encourage Service-Learning. Federal programs, such as AmeriCorps and work-study, should be used in order to encourage service-learning. AmeriCorps volunteers, many of whom serve in disadvantaged public schools with high dropout rates, can be trained as service-learning coordinators and help teachers implement high-quality programs. At the same time, volunteers working outside of schools can reach out to local teachers to create partnerships that involve students in projects working with AmeriCorps. Work-study grants, which provide important resources to college students, should allow students to earn money while working with teachers in schools to help them create high quality service-learning projects.

Learn and Serve America should work with the USA Freedom Corps Coordinating Council in the White House to work with federal agencies to identify ways in which students can productively contribute while engaging in meaningful service. The National Park Service, for instance, could develop a service protocol for school groups, and could work with teachers and schools to involve students in important conservation work, allowing students to learn about American history and our natural and cultural heritage through the 391 units of the National Parks. Similarly, the Department of Defense could engage student groups in assembling care packages for soldiers while learning about the parts of the world where they will be sent.

> *STUDENT VOICE*
> **"I really feel like I am a different person because before service-learning I didn't really look at my community the way I do now. Before I used to not really pay attention to anything. After all these classes I look at my community and see that there have to be some changes made."**

Re-brand Service-Learning to Capture its Spirit and Practice. The vast majority of students and schools do not yet know what service-learning actually is. Leaders should convene working sessions around a discussion of how best to reflect to the public, students, teachers and policymakers the core values, principles, practices and benefits that service-learning currently represents. Too many schools consider academic achievement as measured by standardized tests as their only goal. Service-learning must be highlighted as a valuable asset in reaching academic goals, but also as a key component to a citizen-centered education. Schools should be preparing students for active citizenship, and service-learning is essential to that purpose.

Foster a National Dialogue on Service-Learning. Educators, the service-learning community, non-profit leaders, and policymakers should begin an active dialogue around the power and relevance of service-learning in addressing the high school dropout crisis. National, state and local conferences, congressional hearings in the context of both dropout legislation and service-learning programs, and public forums in schools and communities all across America should be undertaken to further invest leaders in better understanding the dropout epidemic and the promise of service-learning. These discussions should ask what the fundamental goal of our education is, and what it should be. They should seek to identify ways in which schools can be organized to produce graduates able and eager to address the problems our world faces.

CONCLUSION

Educators, researchers, and students themselves have identified what it will take to keep students in school. Schools must make classes more relevant and engaging and enhance the connection between school and the real world; schools must improve instruction and access to supports for struggling students; schools must build a school climate that fosters academics through better discipline; and schools must ensure that students have a strong relationship with at least one adult in the school. Service-learning can help schools advance toward each of these goals. While the teachers who participated in the focus groups said that they could not numerically show that service-learning had prevented students from dropping out of school, they did agree that it could have a positive effect on graduation rates. "I think you would end up with a higher graduation rate," one teacher explained, "because if they're more engaged in their classes, they're going to come to school. It's active, authentic learning, and they're getting more out of it."

Service-learning is not a silver bullet. Even if every student in the country engages in many high-quality service-learning classes, schools, states, and communities will still need to implement comprehensive education reform aimed at ending the dropout crisis. The original and secondary research presented in this report, however, indicates that service-learning should be an essential tool in any dropout prevention strategy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

METHODOLOGY

Peter D. Hart Research Associates conducted original research for this report. The survey consisted of a nationally representative sample of 807 current high school students conducted December 4-6, 2007. The students surveyed were all between the ages of 14 and 18. Thirty-seven percent live in a city, 20 percent live in suburbs, 31 percent live in small towns, and 13 percent live in rural areas. The students were also racially representative of the country: 16 percent Hispanic, 61 percent White, 14 percent Black, 4 percent Asian, and 5 percent other races.

Hart Research also conducted two 90-minute telephone focus groups among service-learning teachers for the report. Although the teachers involved are from across the country, due to the small number of participants the focus groups are not nationally representative and are intended to give context and show what service-learning can achieve, rather than what it does achieve.

In addition, Hart Research conducted one-on-one interviews with students in order to get more specific reactions from service-learning participants. Most of the students who were interviewed were identified by teachers who participated in the focus groups as students who had benefitted from service-learning. The majority of interviews took place by phone, but some were also conducted in person in Washington, DC. These additional findings from the students are not nationally representative and are intended to add depth and the student voice to the research.

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