



Quality Element 1: Programming & Youth Development

The Power of Service Learning

“Service Learning is an approach to teaching and learning that gives students the opportunity to use academic knowledge and skills to address genuine community needs.”

– National Youth Leadership Council

“Service learning...is a method where... learning is deepened through service to others in a process that provides structured time for reflection on the service experience and demonstration of the skills and knowledge acquired.”

– Cathryn Berger Kaye

“The Complete Guide to Service Learning”



Simply put, service learning connects school-based curriculum, educational standards or other academic core content with the inherent caring and concern young people have for their world. This can be at school or in afterschool, locally in the community or on a national or international scale.



Service learning works for kindergarteners to college students and everyone in between... even for adults! Service learning can work in-school and in out-of-school time, in summer programs and at camp. Students of all ages and abilities can participate, and the subjects, topics and skills that can be enhanced and practiced are endless.

Service Learning vs. Community Service

Service learning differs from general community service or volunteer work because the academic component is always at the core. As such, with service learning, students are actively participating in all parts of the process of understanding, integrating and applying knowledge from various subjects as they work to improve their communities.

SERVICE LEARNING	COMMUNITY SERVICE
Includes an academic component	Typically does not have an academic focus
Allows youth to plan their own service projects with group discussion and brainstorming sessions	Usually planned by adults or a party other than those participating
Focuses on learning about broader social issues outside the scope of the project	Learning occurs but is not intentional
Includes reflection on the project goals and outcomes through discussions, writing or presentations	Reflection is not an essential focus
Example: Students in an afterschool program choose to research environmental impacts and then work to preserve the natural habitat of animals living in a nearby forest	Example: Students in an afterschool program take part in a community-wide park clean up day developed by the mayor's office

(Chart from Afterschool Alliance Issue Brief No. 52)

While community service activities allow youth to develop and apply their skills and knowledge to real-life situations and enhances their ability to become productive, contributing adult citizens, including an academic component by allowing youth to lead the service project ties youth development goals to actual gains in the classroom. All of this leads to better students, a brighter future and highlights an example of how afterschool programming benefits children, schools and their communities. (Afterschool Alliance Issue Brief)

Service Learning Resources

NYLC – National Youth Leadership Council has information about what service learning is and how to weave it into your program, a service learning resource center, free curricula and more. NYLC is a one-stop shop for service learning resources. nylc.org

CBK Associates – Cathryn Berger Kaye, a thought leader in service learning, provides a number of great resources including blog posts, video and books. cbkassociates.com

Afterschool Alliance – Search “Service Learning” to find the issue briefs about Service Learning as well as other information and articles about using Service Learning in out-of-school time. afterschoolalliance.org