

Service Learning

in the Social Studies Curriculum

One of the original purposes of public education was to preserve our democracy by educating young people to understand and uphold civic values and to participate in the life of the nation as responsible citizens.

Today, too few students are educated to this standard. Teachers report that most students are disillusioned and alienated from our Constitutional democracy. Many are vocal proponents of their own rights to say what they want, for instance, or to wear what they want. But, beyond this narrow scope, they have virtually no idea of the citizen's duty to participate in community problem solving.

But the tide is turning. A national movement called service learning has begun to reorganize curriculum and restructure classes to teach the skills, knowledge and values that students need to become responsible citizens, to tie community service programs to classroom learning. Beyond facts and concepts of government, this new approach emphasizes critical thinking, problem solving and participation skills and gives students the opportunity to *practice* citizenship.

In *The American Promise* service learning program, students not only learn civic values but also social and problem-solving skills. They are given the opportunity to develop realistic goals and a vision of a challenging future and are empowered to practice the skills of citizenship that will allow them achieve their goals.

*“Everyone can be great, because
anyone can serve.”*

— Martin Luther King

Social studies teachers around the country are beginning to recognize the merits of the service learning movement. Despite the already heavy demands of their curriculum, they have integrated service learning into the schedule, understanding that service gives their students the invaluable opportunity to *experience* citizenship. The students discover in practice the relevance of the principles and process of our Constitutional democracy and develop the knowledge, skills, and values of responsible citizenship in the context of analyzing and solving real community problems.

Beyond the Social Studies

Service learning can yield substantial benefits outside the social studies. You may be able to persuade your colleagues that service learning merits attention in their curriculum. Start by asking your colleagues to serve as advisors to some service learning projects or encourage them to use examples from community problem solving in their teaching.

Science. Many of the toughest public policy issues are scientific in nature or demand scientific thinking to evaluate. How clean should air be? How do we evaluate environmental trade-offs? What are the costs and benefits of preserving local land? Show your colleagues in science The Monday Club segment (in Responsibility). This science curriculum is built around political action.

Math. Opinion polls are an integral part of our political process. What do they mean? How can voters determine when they are being informed and when they are manipulated by numbers? When citizen activists are preparing a persuasive case for their project, how do they evaluate statistical evidence and use it to the best effect? Students can discover that math is relevant in service learning.

Language Arts. Persuasive writing and speaking is at the heart of effective citizen action. Perhaps your colleagues in language arts can devote some class time to developing these skills. Or, call on them to evaluate student writing and speaking efforts.