Service Learning & Afterschool

Community Connections

Out-of-school programs and activities are a wonderful time for students to make connections to their community. With many programs run by community based organizations, or partnering with community based organizations, relationships with the community are already established and avenues for students to strengthen their ties to the community through involvement and service are convenient and accessible. Service Learning is a way for programs to use these community connections to help develop positive relationships between youth and the community while helping support students' academic growth.

Community Service vs. Service Learning

The concept of community service, providing a service to benefit the community, has been around for decades. Unfortunately, it can take on a negative connotation as it is sometimes prescribed as a punishment within the criminal justice system, but beginning in the latter part of the 20th century it became common for school districts in the United States to require a certain number of hours of community service for high school graduation.[1] This service could take many forms, from volunteering with a local service organization to organizing your own service event to anything in between. Typical community service projects are strictly focused on the service, on giving back to the community, and do not necessarily extend beyond volunteering within the boundaries of a specific activity or time frame.

Service Learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, strengthen communities, and effect change locally and/or globally.[1] Making deeper connections to academics than community service projects, service learning allows students to design a service project based on their interests and the needs of their community that incorporates academic components in its design and/or implementation. The distinctive element of service learning is that it enhances the community through the service provided, but it also has powerful learning consequences for the students participating in providing a service. It is a dynamic process through which students personal and social growth is tightly woven into their academic and cognitive development.[2]

Characteristics of Service Learning[3]

- Positive, meaningful, and real experiences
- Cooperative rather than competitive learning promotes teamwork, community involvement, and citizenship
- Addresses complex problems in complex settings rather than simplified problems in isolation
- Offers opportunities to engage in real-world problem solving and real-world applications of academic concepts

Service Learning and Out-of-School Time Programs

Out-of-school time programs are often lauded for their ability to engage educators, youth, parents, and community members in hands-on learning without the time and content restrictions of the school day. Incorporating service learning into OST programming allows

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participants to connect academic concepts to current, real-world situations and issues on a local and/or global scale through student driven learning.

As Rhode Island prepares to adopt Common Core Standards in Mathematics and English Language Arts[5], as well as Next Generation Science Standards[6], OST providers will be gaining access to academic benchmarks consistent across districts and grade levels that give all educators, families, and community partners a common language and set of goals to use when discussing student learning and achievement. When working with students to brainstorm and design service learning projects, OST educators can use the standards to incorporate academic concepts to the service projects – either focusing on concepts that are being taught at the same time the program is going on or reinforcing concepts taught in previous grades or units.

True service learning projects are student driven, this means that students are the primary drivers when it comes to choosing, designing, and completing a service learning project. Most service learning projects are also cooperative, which means that students work as a team in order to achieve the goals of the project. These aspects of the work are imperative to understand prior to beginning a service learning project as determining how a project will be chosen and incorporating strategies to help students work together will be an educator's most significant prep work.[7] With older students (grades three and higher)

students should be able to brainstorm activities and service needs of the local and/or global community with less scaffolding, while younger students (K-2) might do better with a selection of service needs presented to them with the option to choose a focus area and project that interests them. Educators should have strategies in place for how a group work will be incorporated as areas of service can strike a personal cord with groups of students and projects should not start with any resentment towards how groups or service areas were determined.

> Examples of Service Learning Projects[8]
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> - Establishing an afterschool fitness program (including tips for healthy eating) for fellow students

Slightly different from the practices matrix, the crosscutting concepts are explained in two sections. The first section is a description of how the crosscutting concepts can be used in each grade band separated by individual concepts with examples given for the three areas of science (Life Science, Physical Science, and Earth and Space Science) that compromise the NGSS. The second section is a matrix that gives a brief description of each concept, followed by a continuum of how the concepts might develop across the grade bands.

Next Steps

Once the final draft of the NGSS is released in March of 2013 educators across the country will be able to access the standards at www.nextgenscience.org and begin to use them in their work with students in grades K-12. RIASPA will announce the release of the standards to all of its members, and will continue to make connections with science educators both formal and informal across the state in order to support the integration of STEM in out-of-school time programming.

References

[1]http://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/01/nyregion/high-schools-mandating-community-service-for-graduation.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm
[2]http://www.servicelearning.org/what-service-learning[2]www.nextgenscience.org/development-overview
[3]http://www.servicelearning.org/what_is_service-learning/characteristics/index.php
[4]http://www.servicelearning.org/what_is_service-learning/characteristics/index.php
[5]http://www.ride.ri.gov/instruction/commoncore.aspx
[6]http://www.ride.ri.gov/instruction/NextGenScience.aspx
[7]http://www.servicelearning.org/filemanager/download/8542_K-12_SL_Toolkit_UPDATED.pdf
[8]http://www.generationon.org/teachers/service-stories

RIASPA Staff

- Adam Greenman
  Executive Director
- Samantha Andersen

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