

# Service-Learning Can Be the Bridge to Social Emotional Learning. Educators Should Embrace It.

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Voices | Teaching & Learning

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The names of the students mentioned have been changed for this story.

In 2020, California's State Board of Education adopted criteria and guidance to award a State Seal of Civic Engagement to students who demonstrate excellence in civics education. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic set this work back substantially; teachers and students went into survival mode and volunteer opportunities dried up as workplaces closed.

Despite the setback, I believe there is still a way for students to re-engage in school, support their communities and learn leadership skills. After taking a closer look at the social emotional learning (SEL) framework, it is clear there is a connection between SEL and service learning that educators can use and nurture.

In my 20 years as an educator, I have seen firsthand how service-learning engages students as they become leaders in their communities. There is no better way to integrate SEL and civic engagement for the next generation of learners.

## **Service-Learning in Action**

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Jeslyn, a student in my U.S. History class, approached me after the White House threatened to revoke temporary protected status (TPS) for immigrants from El Salvador. After hearing over 200,000 Salvadorans were at risk of deportation, she worried about her mother's immigration status. She decided to investigate whether El Salvador was "safe" enough for people to return if TPS ended.

In no time, this normally reserved student recruited a team of her peers to work with her on this project. Armed with full knowledge of the issue, they dove into the research, recorded public service announcements and canvassed their community for advocates. Interestingly, before this point, Jeslyn and her peers had always needed my guidance on these kinds of projects; all of a sudden, they were working bell-to-bell, motivated by their passion for the issue. Part of me wondered, had my role shifted towards helping them find resources and less toward managing classroom engagement?

The following year, the Woolsey fire closed our school on parent conference night, causing severe damage to surrounding neighborhoods. This disaster turned many of my students into evacuees. In the aftermath of the fire, impacted students were inspired to conduct a service-learning project and document what happened to wildfire victims. One of my most resourceful students, Sheliya, found an article about the Open Homes project, a program created by Airbnb that offered free emergency housing to displaced people due to natural disasters.

Despite widespread publicity, this student could not find one wildfire victim who had successfully participated in the program. However, after taking matters into her own hands, Sheliya was able to find a person on social media that secured housing via Open Homes. Sheliya then brokered an agreement between local government officials and Airbnb to publish more data on the effectiveness of these types of programs in the city.

Shortly after graduation, Sheliya received a full-time job offer based on her efforts in this service-learning project — not a bad outcome for a high school service-learning project.

What I have learned from coaching hundreds of students over two decades is that while some students need intensive support, others just need me to get out of their way.

## Confusing Terminology

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Though I like to differentiate service-learning to emphasize attempts to influence policy, my students simply define service-learning as doing something worthwhile that makes adults listen to them.

Community service, civic engagement and service-learning are often used interchangeably in education. Educational equity researchers Grossman and Duchesneau define service-learning as “a type of civic engagement or community service where students help address real-world problems (often in their local communities), but with explicit learning goals embedded in the projects.” Alternatively, the National Youth Leadership Council defines service-learning as “an approach to teaching and learning in which students use academic and civic knowledge and skills to address genuine community needs.

Though I like to differentiate service-learning to emphasize attempts to influence policy, my students simply define service-learning as “doing something worthwhile that makes adults listen to them.”

Regardless of how an educator arrives at their understanding, at the root of service-learning is the intent to serve and address problems in one's community. My students understand this well and it shows in the heart and commitment they bring to each project they complete.

These terms must be used more precisely to advance the field's work. Clear and consistent terminology will help parents, teachers, and school stakeholders disseminate best practices thoughtfully and deliberately.

## Implementation Issues

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Service-learning projects reinforce SEL because they broaden perspectives, deepen social awareness and connect actions to the needs of communities.

Personally, I believe that teaching SEL as a stand-alone is poor pedagogy. Service-learning projects reinforce SEL because they broaden perspectives, deepen social awareness and connect actions to the needs of communities. If the actions of my former students are any indication, service-learning can integrate and strengthen SEL.

Unfortunately, there are various issues that plague any efforts toward broad implementation of service-learning. Due to the expectation that teachers can cover unrealistic grade-level standards, they are often strapped for time. Lecturing and quizzing on content is more efficient than coaching and mentoring groups of students through real-world problems. As a result, teachers do not devote enough time to be able to integrate service-learning on their own.

Moreover, and to my surprise, the California Professional Standards for Education Leaders do not address service-learning or include service-learning in administrator training. SEL programs are not reported either. Based on the connection between service-learning and SEL, you would think mandating districts to report the number of state civic seals issued could motivate significant buy-in, allowing schools and educators to implement service-learning at scale. Unfortunately, this is not (yet) the case.

Another reality is that most school administrators have very little background in implementing effective service-learning programs and would need considerable training. Fortunately, numerous organizations promote meaningful service-learning opportunities for students:

- **Civic Action Project (CAP):** launched in 2009, CAP facilitates a transformative civic experience for students that weaves together intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional competencies.
- **Integrated Actions Civics Project:** developed between The UC Berkeley History Social Science Project and the Santa Clara and San Mateo county offices of education, this project offers tested strategies to support the integration of civic engagement into classrooms.
- **Educating for American Democracy:** offers an interactive roadmap for using an inquiry model when teaching civics and history. This work supplies essential questions to hook K-12 students in thematic instruction.

## Moving the Needle

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My perspective as a history teacher is that service learning and social-emotional learning are competing initiatives. To move the needle, policymakers need to make both equitable priorities to alleviate implementation challenges. Social studies teachers also need more coaching and feedback to become effective service-learning facilitators.

In an era where political polarization and public gaslighting make educators hesitant to approach controversial issues in their classrooms, these groups provide best practices and training. Teachers need time to sift through these resources before starting their service-learning journey. They also need time to plan and debrief their administrators on how well service-learning is being implemented at their school site. This needs to be a collaboration, not a top-down mandate.

Every year, students like Jesylyn and Sheliya teach me how service-learning can transform students into agents of change, increasing their leadership skills while improving their communities. Let's empower our teachers to lead the way by embracing an interdisciplinary approach that integrates SEL with service-learning in K-12 education.

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