



Building Community Through Service-Learning: The Role of the Community Partner

By Susan A. Abravanel

INTRODUCTION

The students in Mike Walsh's Natural Resources class at Nestucca Valley Middle School in Beaver, Oregon, are learning in the woods. Twice a month, teams are managing their own experimental forest, a quarter-mile strip of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) property in Pacific City divided into 100-by-100 foot sections. Their curriculum begins with measuring and marking out the plots, removing invasive scotch broom plants, and marking and taking inventory of the lodgepole pine trees planted in rows 30 years earlier to hold back the shifting dunes. These 7th- and 8th-grader students will develop comprehensive management plans, outlining in detail which trees they will remove from their plots, and the number, variety and location of native trees and shrubs they will select to plant in their place. As they learn, the students are providing the BLM with a healthier forest, and a group of young citizens is beginning to understand what is involved in adaptive forest management.

The Nestucca Valley students are engaged in service-learning, a teaching-and-learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities.¹

In a service-learning program, the following happens, as illustrated by Nestucca Valley Middle School's effort:

- ***Students identify a real community need.*** The BLM helps Nestucca Valley Middle School students see that their forest lacks the space in plantings and the diversity of natural species to be considered a “healthy” forest. Students excited by the opportunity to transform a real plot of land can feel empowered when given the responsibility to develop, design and implement their own restoration plans.
- ***The service activity is tied to academic goals.*** Plot and tree measurements become lessons in mathematics. Research in native and invasive species connects to science benchmarks. The development of management plans and a field journal tie into language arts goals. As students investigate why the pines and scotch broom had been planted in the first place, they research the history and geography of the region.
- ***Students reflect on, and evaluate, their service experience.*** Structured reflection activities help students make the connection between their classroom lessons and their role as young community members working with a government agency to plan for the future.
- ***Adults join in student recognition and celebration.*** Students prepare video and photographic presentations of their work to share with the community.

Implicit in the *term*, service-learning – perhaps signified by the hyphenation² – is a symbiotic relationship between meaningful service to the community and rich, academic learning. Implicit in the *strategy* is a similar relationship between the community partner and the school.

“The teacher and community partner need to talk about the learning goals ahead of time,” explains Warren

Tausch, BLM adaptive management area coordinator. Tausch works closely with teacher Mike Walsh in developing the onsite lesson plans for the students. “It is all too easy to forget to focus, and refocus, and miss a learning opportunity,” he says. In service-learning, deliberate learning happens side-by-side with service.

What is unusual about Tausch's emphasis on learning goals is that he is the community partner – not the teacher – in this service-learning relationship. Tausch and Walsh began their service-learning partnership in a more traditional manner, with Walsh providing the curricular and academic benchmark goals to frame Tausch's professional and hands-on knowledge of coastal forest ecology. In the early onsite meetings with students, Tausch recalls that he left the teaching up to Walsh, adding an expansive or explanatory comment only occasionally. As the work developed, he found himself increasingly engaged in focused conversations with students and eventually began to do some of the “real teaching” on site. Today, it is not unusual for Tausch to drop in on the students in their classrooms to guide them as they follow up, through research and analysis, on their lessons in the forest.

The impact of service-learning is promising³; the research to date shows benefits to school and community alike. Students who have been involved in high-quality service-learning programs demonstrate an increased sense of personal and social responsibility and are less likely to engage in “risk” behaviors. At the same time, these students show gains in motivation to learn, resulting in higher attendance rates and increased academic performance. Service-learning has a positive effect on interpersonal development, helping students learn to trust and be trusted by others, and contributing to their performance as part of a team. Students see themselves as positive contributors to their community, feeling they can “make a difference.”

It is the role of the school, however, that has been the focus of most of the current research, “best-practices” literature and tools that have been developed to support this strategy. The past five years alone have seen the development of multiple training opportunities, Web sites, “how-to” guides and mentor organizations – at the local, state and national levels – all designed to help an educator interested in learning more about service-learning. There is a lack, however, of similarly helpful and supportive material for community-service organizations or agencies approached as potential service-learning partners or that may even want to initiate a relationship with the school.⁴

This issue paper has been designed especially with the community partner in mind. As Chuck Supple, executive director of the (California) Governor's Office on Service and Volunteerism points out, “The question of agency readiness, willingness and ability is critical to the ultimate success of service-learning. . . .”⁵ From the school perspective, what can be done to encourage and support the emergence of the agency or organization as a partner? From the agency or organization perspective, what are the significant considerations involved in establishing successful service-learning partnerships? This paper highlights effective strategies, using “best-practice” examples to illustrate the potential impact on the service-learning partnership.

The paper's focus is on *school-based*, as distinct from *community-based*, service-learning. School-based service-learning is part of a school program and integrates school-set academic goals and curriculum into the service activity. Community-based service-learning is usually part of an after-school or extracurricular program and often is conducted by a community-based organization serving youth directly. The curricular connection, while providing a learning context for the service activity, is not usually associated with school-based academic goals. A number of the strategic recommendations presented in this paper, however, especially those dealing with changes within the organization or agency itself, may be applicable to both situations.

The Role of Community Organizations and Agencies:

From Community Service to Service-Learning

Community organizations and agencies have long recognized the value of involving youth in their service activities. Young people can provide additional volunteer help in meeting community needs. In such commu-

nity-service opportunities, the organization provides or makes arrangement for the site where the service will take place; recruits and trains the volunteers; and plans and coordinates the activity, directing the student volunteers to complete predetermined tasks.

One outcome of the activity is service to the community. Youth may or may not receive school credit for their participation; a teacher may or may not be involved with the student or the agency. Learning may occur, although it is not intentional, nor is there an integral connection to academic goals. Reflection is incidental to the service activity. Youth participants gain a sense of contribution, of pride in their efforts and a greater understanding of the community need they have met. Working side-by-side with other volunteers (adult or student), they share in assuming civic responsibility for the task at hand.

In community service, the organization or agency recruits and responds to youth in much the same way as it does to all its volunteers. The young person is, in fact, looked upon primarily as a “volunteer.” The organization's focus is, first and foremost, on meeting its goals. While there may be some attempt to accommodate specific student or school group needs – hours of service, transportation to the site, training, supervision, etc. – the primary objective is completing the community-service activity.

Within the last two decades, organizations and agencies have faced two significant trends, each producing a noticeable impact on their ability to recruit youth for participation in community service. These trends include:

- In *Bowling Alone*, Harvard University Professor Robert Putnam notes a significant decline in civic engagement, especially in volunteering and participation in community projects.⁶ He advocates that youth become engaged in well-designed service-learning programs, especially those “woven into the fabric of the school curriculum.”⁷
- At the same time, the adoption of standards-based education reform in virtually every state has resulted in an intensified focus on meeting academic and curricular goals throughout the school program. Teachers, held accountable for higher student achievement, are no longer willing to excuse students from class to do community-service activities.

Service agencies and organizations, trying to meet growing community needs with decreasing financial resources, have turned for help to the volunteer sector. But they have found that schools resist recruiting young people as volunteers unless the activity can be tied to curriculum and academic goals in addition to the service goals. Agency and organizational leaders, once they understand why their community-service opportunities are not as welcome as they once were, are turning to service-learning programs – often because it is the only way they can get through the school door.

The Tillamook County, Oregon, Performance Partnership develops partner relationships to promote economic stability and coordinate environmental restoration within the county. Staff Associate Suzan Greenwood recalls how her initial outreach to involve students in watershed restoration activities was rejected by area schools. Listening carefully to teacher concerns about taking students away from the critical work of meeting state standards, Greenwood ordered a copy of the standards herself, and aligned her program goals to benchmarks in several subjects. When she showed the schools how students could meet academic goals through their restoration activities, their service-learning partnership was on its way.

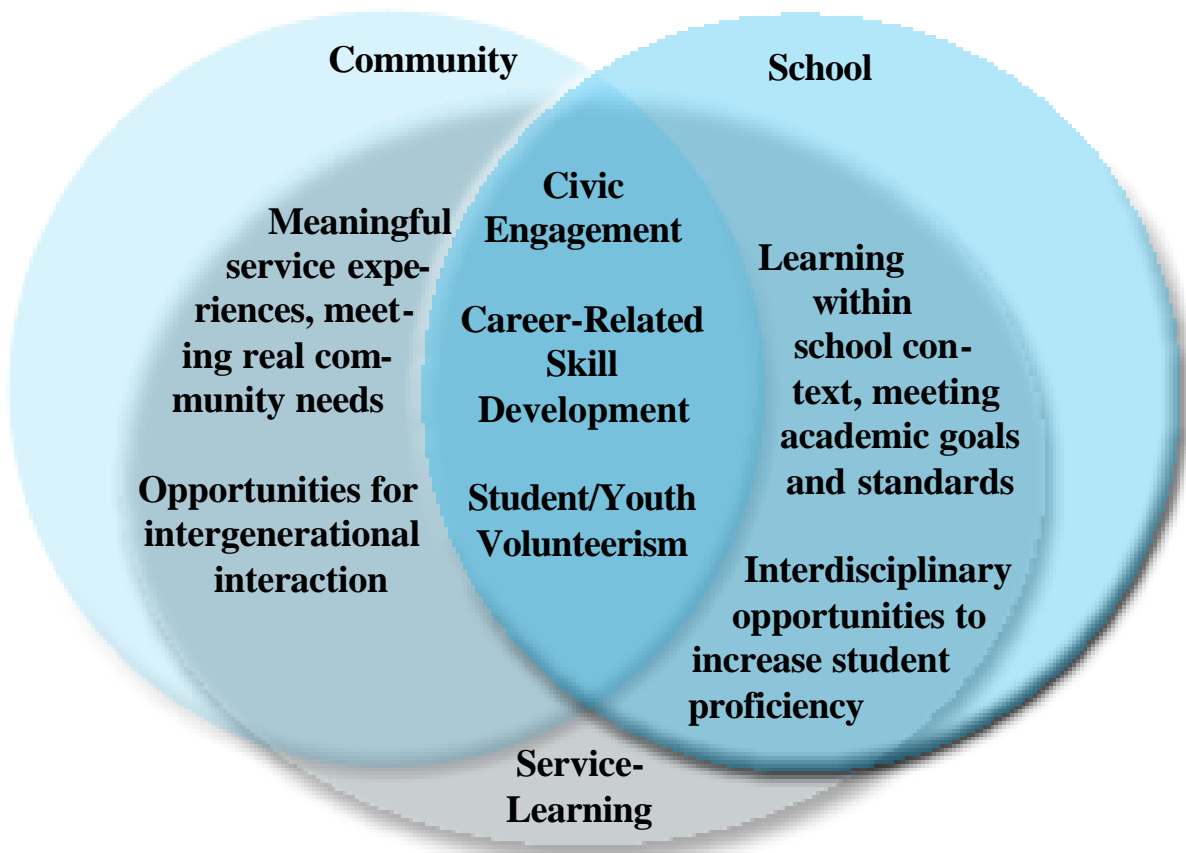
The agency or organization, so skilled in coordinating community-service programs to meet its mission, is likely to enter into an unfamiliar paradigm as a co-educator in a service-learning relationship.

The Service-Learning Partnership

The service-learning relationship brings together the school's needs and resources with the community's needs and resources, to enhance the effectiveness of each:

- The school enters the partnership with a focus on learning within the school context, developed to meet academic goals and standards, ideally in a number of content areas.
- The school turns to the community, seeking opportunities for civic engagement through which the student can acquire civic understanding and career-related skills.
- The community partner provides meaningful service experiences set in a “real-life” context and meeting real community needs, as well as opportunities for students to interact with adults and be acknowledged as positive, contributing members to society.
- The community turns to the school seeking student and youth volunteers to help meet its goals.

The following diagram illustrates the service-learning partnership:



The Community-Based Organization and the School: How Do They Differ?

The successful service-learning partnership will strive to improve the quality of education, as it improves the quality of life in the community. Both school and community need to see the partnership as a better way to achieve the goals that each has individually, as well as any goals they might develop together along the way.

Partnership building begins with each partner getting to know the other. Mark Batenburg (1995) points out that “the two partners exist in radically different worlds,” and suggests the importance of understanding the cultural distinctions between them.”⁸ The key to smoother relations is not only to be aware of the cultural differences, but to be aware of the specific details of the clash, the daily places where misunderstandings occur and frustrations mount.”⁹

The following chart identifies seven points of difference:

	<i>Community Organization /Agency</i>	<i>School</i>
<i>Focus</i>	The organization or agency focuses on the end <i>product</i> : trees planted, houses built, meals prepared, students tutored, clients served.	The school focuses on the <i>process</i> , the learning involved in the project, the acquisition of knowledge and skills.
<i>Why Engage in Service-Learning</i>	The organization or agency sees service-learning as an opportunity to involve youth volunteers, to meet current and future community needs.	The school sees service-learning as an effective strategy to educate students and teach civic responsibility.
<i>Project Planning and Leadership</i>	The community partner generally follows a template, based on prior experiences with managing volunteers to meet the goals of the organization or agency.	The school sees “youth voice” as an essential component in service-learning, with students assuming the role of planning and leading the project.
<i>Project Scheduling</i>	The organization or agency schedules projects based either on the needs of the constituency served, or on the availability of adult volunteers; weekend projects are often a good option.	The school plans service-learning projects to coordinate with class schedules; ideally, the project takes place during the school day.
<i>Access to Project Sites</i>	The community partner usually does not assume responsibility for transporting volunteers to and from the project site.	The school must consider the added direct cost, liability and scheduling consequences if transportation to and from the project site is required.
<i>Measure of Success</i>	The organization or agency determines its success by the completion or provision of service, as defined by the task.	The school measures success in meeting curricular or academic benchmarks and standards.
<i>Assessment</i>	The community partner asks, “How did we do?” – and evaluates success based on concrete, quantifiable results such as how many trees were planted, how many acres were restored, how many clients were served.	The school sees the project as part of a continuum and asks, “What will we do differently if we do this again?” Evaluation originates from the reflection process, ongoing throughout the project.

Suzan Greenwood of the Tillamook County Performance Partnership in Oregon sees the development of trust as the key element in establishing her service-learning partnership with the school. “The first barrier I had to overcome,” she recalls, “was the high level of mistrust between the community and the schools. There was so much criticism within the community of the education system and of teachers. I felt that we needed to show them that we - the community - could be helpful, constructive partners in education.”

Open and frequent communication is also essential. Each partner is an expert in its own sphere; each needs to teach the other about the organization’s work. Much like the reflection component in service-learning itself, opportunities for interaction between the partner and the school need to be ongoing to continually enhance and refine the partnership.

What the School Needs To Communicate to the Community Partner

What is service-learning?

- Provide a definition that can be easily understood – one that will help the organization identify its role as the community partner.
- Illustrate the definition with “best-practice” examples of service-learning partnerships involving organizations or agencies with a similar mission. The prospective partner will relate best to local examples; if possible, suggest a site visit.
- Assist the community partner in understanding how service-learning – by making a deliberate connection between service and learning opportunities, and by including structured reflection – differs from community service.
- Emphasize to the community partner the need to keep its own mission in focus, establishing high expectations of the student to assume and complete tasks that will advance that mission.

What are the essential elements in a service-learning program?

- Determine the level of experience the community partner has in working with youth and build upon that experience to identify and explain the essential elements. Building upon the familiar will make service-learning seem more manageable, and not such a “new” program.
- Introduce new concepts using terminology that is easily understood; school personnel especially should try to avoid using education jargon. Enable the community partner to view service-learning as accessible.
- Illustrate the elements by showing what they look like as components of real service-learning programs. If possible, introduce the elements by involving the partner in a brief service-learning experience.
- Help the community partner to see the role of the school and the agency or organization in meeting each element.

What are the benefits to the community of service-learning?

The success of service-learning depends not only on its practice within the school, but also on the advocacy, support and involvement of the community. An understanding of the benefits of service-learning is essential to help the community-based organization justify its commitment to the partnership and to answer the question, “How does this help us?”

- Provide the organization or agency with evidence from the research on the effects of service-learning.¹¹ Select key points that demonstrate a direct impact on the way youth interact with the community. Students engaged in service-learning, for example:
 - ✓ Showed an increase in their level of awareness of community needs
 - ✓ Were more likely to develop bonds with a greater number of adults
 - ✓ Developed positive work orientation attitudes and skills
 - ✓ Were more likely to be engaged in a community organization and to vote 15 years after their service-learning experiences than those who did not participate in the program.
- Help the community partner see the value of the youth service in service-learning as both a short- and long-term resource. In meeting the organization's needs, young people can do the following:
 - ✓ Perform needed project-specific tasks
 - ✓ Provide the organization with an opportunity to develop sustained volunteer assistance that will, over time and with training, become increasingly valuable
 - ✓ Increase visibility, awareness and understanding of the organization and its mission within the community.

What are the academic or curricular standards to which teachers are held accountable?

The national movement to adopt standards-based education reforms has largely eluded the world beyond the school. Educators are trained, and paid, to understand what the state-set standards are and how they are to be implemented. Community partners, by contrast, often first encounter standards when they are told, by the school, that teachers no longer have the time to involve students in community service because of the demands of meeting rigorous new academic benchmarks and testing.

- Introduce a discussion of the state standards, in easy-to-understand terminology that avoids education jargon. In the 1980s, national research in education consistently showed that an alarming number of students graduating from high school lacked essential skills and knowledge. Even those who had been relatively successful students often were not able to apply knowledge and skills learned in the classroom to real-life situations.

The standards movement is an attempt to “raise the bar,” to set rigorous academic standards for all students. In addition, standards reform in a number of states has led to the inclusion of “real-life” problem-solving experiences, requiring students to demonstrate their ability to apply acquired classroom skills and knowledge in developing and implementing solutions.

- Invite community partners to collaborate with teachers in developing service experiences and opportunities that will increase both student and teacher understanding of civic engagement.
- Help community partners see academic standards and learning outcomes as equivalent – for the educator – to the job-performance standards they have to meet or to the organization's mission.
- Recognize the community partner is not responsible for meeting the academic standards or for understanding the mechanics of how the service experience can be aligned to the standards. The better the partner understands the standards' significance, however, the easier it is to incorporate both service and learning goals into the program. Partners, in fact, may see it as a marketing benefit to prepare standards-aligned service-learning programs at their site.

What is “youth voice,” and why is it important?

In service-learning, “youth voice” refers to the inclusion of young people in the planning and implementation of the service opportunity. “When youth voice is missing from a service program, young people may feel

SOLV is a statewide Oregon nonprofit organization with a 30-year history of recruiting and organizing thousands of community volunteers to clean up and enhance the environment.

Portland Parks and Recreation turned to SOLV for assistance with involving Portland area schools in regular basic maintenance activities – picking up litter, raking leaves, clearing out fallen limbs, etc. – in their neighborhood parks. Portland Parks found it very difficult to convince schools to become involved in its community-service “Adopt-A-Park” program.

SOLV's own commitment to service-learning led them to encourage Portland Parks to consider a different approach. All the Portland Parks personnel who were to work with the program were invited to a workshop and asked what they wanted to get out of the program. They responded they were hoping to have students assist with basic maintenance tasks. SOLV then introduced the parks personnel to the demands on teachers in schools today, outlining the reasons behind the standards movement and walking the group through the terminology of Oregon's standards. “Students need to meet learning goals in all their activities,” the facilitator explained. “You are all experts in your particular parks. Think of yourself as a teacher. What could you help a student learn by working in *your* park?”

“We need to install a new irrigation system in my park,” came the first response. “Students could help us determine the hydrology needs of the various areas and plantings around the park.” Twenty-four more learning ideas followed and, from these, SOLV worked with a team of educators to develop the *new* “Adopt-A-Park” program. They designed a comprehensive service-learning curriculum, with hundreds of suggested activities extending across eight subject areas, and then aligned each activity to Oregon standards and benchmarks. SOLV knew, from its own prior experiences with service-learning programs, that the curricular alignments would be a magnet for teachers already overwhelmed by the tracking and testing demands of standards implementation.

more discouraged and alienated. To them, service becomes just one more place in their lives where their ideas are not respected and their contributions are unimportant.”¹²

It is important to understand that most community partners, with their focus on the “end product,” will likely be reluctant to relinquish aspects of the management of their program to students. This will be especially true for the organization or agency with limited experience involving youth in their service opportunities.

Billig¹³ has observed that the greater the degree of responsibility given to youth for “planning, decisionmaking, problem solving and assessing their learning”, the better the outcome. On the other hand, “when service is imposed from above without youth input and without adequate structure and support, young people may view their service experiences with indifference, suspicion or even hostility.”¹⁴ The community partner, looking to the sustainability of its own volunteer base, is likely to resonate most to the argument that service-learning which incorporates youth voice can have a lasting effect; youth will engage in service now and later in life.¹⁵

- Introduce the community partner to some of the research on the importance of youth voice. Help the partner understand how youth voice will enhance the results of the service opportunity, resulting in both short- and long-term benefits not only for youth, but also for the community.
- Provide examples of successful service-learning programs in which youth voice was a determining factor. If possible, include the responsible students in this meeting with the partner.
- Review opportunities with the organization or agency for including youth voice in the design and implementation of the service opportunities under discussion.

What the Community Partner Needs To Communicate to the School

Community organizations and agencies identify and address a variety of community needs. For the school, creating an effective, sustainable partnership for service-learning begins with finding the community partner most able to meet specific identified priorities. School leaders will want to know what the community partner expects from the service-learning relationship, what expertise the partner has that can benefit student learning, and how the partner plans to accommodate the student service experience. School officials also will want to assess the level of engagement and the degree of flexibility the partner is willing to apply to the service-learning relationship as a whole.

What is the mission of the community-based organization?

- Present a clear statement of the organization or agency's mission to the school. The school will be better able to match academic and curricular goals to the service activity if the mission is clearly understood.
- Help school leaders understand that meeting the mission is “the bottom line” for the organization. Just as the school will measure the success of the service-learning program by how well it meets academic and curricular goals, the community partner will measure success by how the program helps fulfill the organization's mission.
- Share with the school the reasons why the organization or agency has an interest in establishing a partnership for service-learning, and the potential benefits anticipated from the experience. Invite the school to respond. With expectations on both sides articulated “up front,” the partnership then will be able to accommodate or modify the service-learning activity for a mutually successful outcome.

What is the capacity of the organization or agency to provide students with authentic service-learning opportunities?

The school partner in service-learning turns to the community primarily to provide students experience with a “real community need.” Ideally, students will be able to address the community problem or issue by applying classroom-based knowledge and skills. The school also seeks to engage students in activities that will further

their understanding of community participation and promote civic responsibility. Finally, the school looks for opportunities, within the service activity, for youth decisionmaking and leadership – “youth voice.”

- Present to the school the “real community needs” to which the organization or agency responds. Share with the school if and how students would participate in identifying and assessing a particular need they might want to address.
- Guide the school through available community resources and potential partners who might help address the identified community need. Suggest that students ask the following questions:
 - ✓ *Who are the stakeholders?*
 - ✓ *How is the stakeholder organized?*
 - ✓ *How do the stakeholders identify their interests?*
 - ✓ *Who is the contact?*
 - ✓ *What is their capacity?*
 - ✓ *What is their experience with youth?*
 - ✓ *How do stakeholders gather information and build trustworthy relationships?*
- Map out, for the school, special training needs, supervision issues or risks that might be associated with the activity. The partnership then can determine who will be responsible for training, how supervision will be handled and what special precautions will be in place to deal with potential risks.
- Discuss with school officials the level of student responsibility for planning and implementation the organization is willing to permit. The school and organization together may want to develop graduated criteria for increasing student ownership of the activity.

What resources can the community partner provide to support the service-learning partnership?

As schools face declining funding and increasing costs, they are turning to the community to provide needed education resources. Service-learning is a way of bringing such resources to the school, for students to use in providing service to the community. For example, organizations and agencies can provide plant materials and mulch to students restoring a watershed area, or lumber and hardware to students building affordable housing, or paint and brushes to students enhancing a neighborhood with a mural.

- Review with the school the materials needed for the service-learning activity, and what the organization or agency can provide. Encourage the school to help students understand that the resources are not “free,” but are in return for their valued service to the community.

Habitat for Humanity in Tillamook County, Oregon, has a thriving service-learning partnership with Tillamook Junior High School. The program began when the local Habitat vice president, Jim Carlson, was asked to help establish a service-learning math class in partnership with the organization. “Our main resources,” Carlson explains, “were people, of *all ages*.”

School leaders, already involved with other service-learning programs, saw the potential for its math classes. With Carlson's help, they developed a unit on measurement. As students worked to read blueprints, they used rulers and tape measures, learning computation and fractions along the way. Eventually, the teachers involved developed a workbook for the program and aligned the unit to state standards. To their delight, assessment of the activity showed an 18% increase in student math test scores, at the same time as it made Tillamook one of the most successful rural Habitat programs in the country.

Following up on success at the junior high school, Carlson sought to offer continued opportunity for community involvement to participating students. He put together a coalition of the local electrical union, plumbers' union, building trades association and mental health professionals associated with Habitat for Humanity, to support development of a similar program at the high school.

What are the “costs” for the community partner?

Even the best-intentioned community partner will want to look at service-learning from a cost-benefit perspective. Service-learning can help reach the agency's goals of youth involvement and increased community visibility, but how will the agency pay for the direct costs involved, such as staff salaries and materials? While schools, especially in the public system, can rely on funding allocations even in difficult times, community partners are usually nonprofit organizations and have no such guarantees. Moreover, most of the available resources supporting service-learning are directed to schools, leaving the community partner to find competitive grant and foundation funding, and the occasional corporate sponsor.

- Be prepared to share with the school the direct costs involved in partnering. Encourage the school to look as these as part of the overall project experience costs, rather than as a payment made to the organization.
- Suggest to the school that you might develop a joint budget, and seek funding together, accommodating the needs of both partners.

What the Organization or Agency Needs To Do Internally

To fully support service-learning, the school needs to accommodate the strategy throughout its organizational structure. The National Youth Leadership Council identified five “Essential Elements”¹⁶ through which service-learning goals are integrated into the school's mission, operational structure and professional development. The incorporation of each of these elements involves the introduction of specific school, district or even statewide policies and practices.

Allowing for some modification, these “Essential Elements” suggest a similar process that needs to take place within the organization or agency as well. The chart below illustrates the organizational support for service-learning:

Organizational Support for Service-Learning			
<i>School</i>	<p>Cluster I: Mission and Policy <u>Essential Element 1:</u> Effective service-learning is connected to and relevant to the district's mission.</p> <p><u>Essential Element 2:</u> Effective service-learning is supported by school and district policies designed to uphold quality service-learning practice.</p>	<p>Cluster II: Organizational Structure and Resources <u>Essential Element 3:</u> Effective service-learning is supported by compatible structural elements and by the resources necessary to sustain high-quality service-learning practice.</p>	<p>Cluster III: Professional Development <u>Essential Element 4:</u> Effective service-learning provides staff with strong training in the philosophy and pedagogy of service-learning.</p> <p><u>Essential Element 5:</u> Effective service-learning offers staff ongoing opportunities to network, observe and problem solve with other staff within and outside their schools to refine their service-learning practice.</p>
<i>Community Partner</i>	<p>Mission: <i>Does the organization's mission allow for the inclusion of service-learning?</i></p> <p>Strategic Goals: <i>Can the organization or agency's strategic goals be modified to include service-learning as a method of achieving the organization's mission?</i></p>	<p>Staff Time and Resources: <i>Does the organization or agency have – and is it willing to commit – the necessary staff time and resources to support service-learning?</i></p>	<p>Students as Learners: <i>Does the organization or agency staff understand and support service-learning, as distinct from community service? Can the organization adapt to accommodate students as “learners,” as well as “volunteers”?</i></p> <p>Collaboration: <i>Will the organization be willing, and able, to collaborate with the school in the planning and development of mutually beneficial service-learning opportunities? Are there other community partners engaged in service-learning with whom the organization can develop a network?</i></p>

How will the community partner build internal support for service-learning?

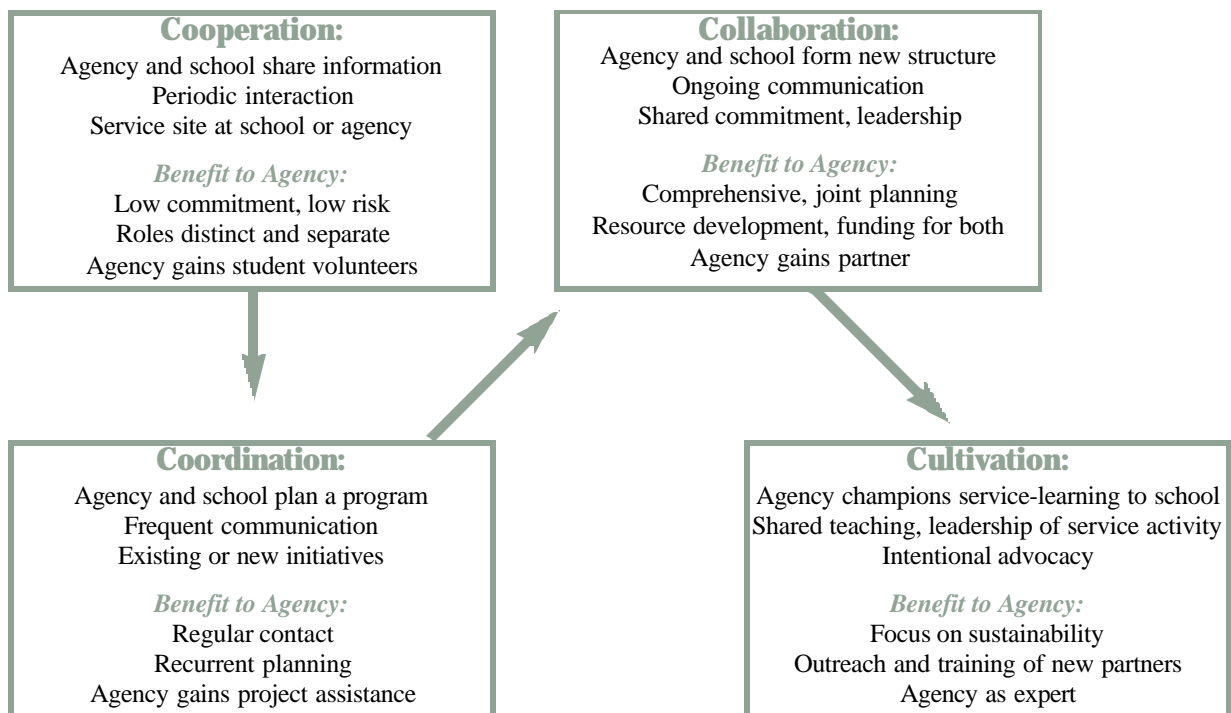
- Recruit people within the organization who understand and are committed to youth and education outside of the classroom.

“We found that when people from our organization who really love working with kids get involved in the program, the kids are enthusiastic and things happen very successfully,” says Warren Tausch, who assesses agency buy-in within the Tillamook Bureau of Land Management.

- Look for a “champion” within the organization, someone who will step forward to advance the cause of service-learning. The effective champion is well-respected by coworkers and helps other leaders see the benefits – to both the organization and the school – of a service-learning partnership. The champion shares this vision with others, recognizes what needs to be done to bring along the organization and motivates necessary accommodations in organizational practices and policies.
- Provide opportunities for training in service-learning to all organization or agency staff. Recognize that this will likely be a gradual process, most effective when offered in manageable segments over time.
- Encourage broad-based support for service-learning within the organization. Long-term support for the service-learning partnership relates directly to the degree of ownership that each staff member assumes – and can maintain the commitment in the event the champion leaves the organization.
- Include the organization's board of directors in seeking buy-in for involvement in service-learning. As the organization considers the sustainability of its commitment, the board may be asked to approve supportive changes in policy or strategic goals.

The Partnership Continuum

The relationship that makes up the partnership will adapt, as the school and the organization each becomes more committed to and comfortable with, service-learning practices. Each successive stage in the following continuum¹⁷ involves increased interaction between the partners and emphasis on the shared vision as it relates to both service and learning.



Seeking to develop a long-term relationship with volunteers on a watershed restoration site, SOLV (a statewide Oregon nonprofit organization, which recruits and organizes community volunteers on environmental issues) approached an advanced-level environmental studies class in Portland's Lincoln High School. Collaborating with the teacher to incorporate curricular goals, SOLV staff introduced the technical process of watershed restoration and the needs of the specific site to students in a series of in-class presentations. Students then planned a number of onsite activities, incorporating their learning goals into the various stages of the restoration.

On their first trip to the site, students were excited to discover an invasive plant species new to the area, known as Policeman's Helmet. Their subsequent classroom research informed them that, while not yet common to Western Oregon, Policeman's Helmet is one of the 20 most prevalent invasive plants globally.

Students identified the need to remove the invasive plant. Then, turning service into learning, they set up a series of monitoring plots to evaluate the impact of different removal techniques on the plant and determine how quickly it will return even if the area is overplanted with native plants.

The students will turn their learning into benefits to the community by identifying the plant and presenting a new understanding of how to deal with it. They also have planned an informational campaign in the neighborhood around the watershed, alerting neighbors to the existence of Policeman's Helmet and to what they are learning about its eradication. Bringing the neighbors together for these community meetings builds community among a group of neighbors who otherwise may not have much interaction with one another.

Turning Around Challenges: How Do Successful Community Partners Respond?

As community organizations and agencies transition from providing youth with sites for service to becoming partners in service-learning, they engage in a process that challenges traditional patterns of operation both within the organization and in the way it relates to the school. Service-learning champions have found the following strategies to be effective responses:

Challenge: *“Service-learning will add to my workload. I am already stretched.”*

- Help staff members see the immediate benefits of service that youth can provide in meeting the organization's mission.
- Encourage staff to consider the future benefit of developing connected, committed citizens who will understand and respond to the specific community needs addressed by the organization.

Challenge: *“Service-learning may meet the goals of the school, but it doesn't help us respond to the mission of our organization.”*

- Clearly establish up front, with the school, that the organization also will need to meet its goals through the service activity.
- Use presentations made by teaching staff or by students themselves to convince agency managers of the program's value.

Challenge: *“We have limited staff and resources and don't think we can sustain the diversion that service-learning would mean for our organization.”*

- Consider joining with other community partners in a broad coalition. This will enable the service-learning partnership to continue even when one agency is temporarily unable to contribute staff time.

Challenge: *“The school seems to be teaching a political point-of-view that is not shared by our organization or by many in the community itself.”*

- Develop programs that present balanced perspectives, especially with respect to areas of controversy.

Challenge: *How have other community partners handled the same issue or situation that we are dealing with?”*

- Develop a network with other service-learning community partners in your area. Schools engaged in service-learning have long recognized the value in sharing strategies for success.

Challenge: *“Why am I being asked to do the job of the school? I am not a trained educator.”*

- Encourage agency staff to consider the value in their own expertise and to see service-learning as a way of introducing the world of work to young people.
- Explain that service-learning is not meant to replace the teacher or to put the organization staff person in an uncomfortable role. Help the staff see themselves as resources in the education process.

Jan Schock is an elementary school principal in Warrenton, a small Oregon coastal community. Through her reading in education journals, she was attracted to the potential of service-learning. “We need to look for ways to connect students to community,” she explains. “Our society has become increasingly transient, parents are too busy, so the responsibility falls to the school.

Shock questioned how best to introduce service-learning to her already overburdened staff. Not wanting them to see it as yet another new program, she was searching for a “ready-made” and easy to adapt opportunity.

For eight years, SOLV (a statewide nonprofit organization that builds community partnerships through volunteer action) had sponsored a statewide one-day enhancement program along public waterways, called “Down By the Riverside.” Always on a Saturday, the program was run by a number of committed site coordinators, usually restoration or parks personnel. The program had wide appeal, attracting urban and rural communities alike. Year after year, however, SOLV was faced with the same complaint from the site coordinators: no matter how they tried, they simply could not get much participation from area schools.

Last year, as a pilot project, SOLV applied its new expertise in service-learning to the problem. SOLV began by developing a “package”: a curriculum for the program, linked to state standards, to be introduced by training in service-learning offered to all participating teachers. The pilot site date was moved from Saturday to Friday, to accommodate the school day. Then SOLV sent one of its site coordinators out to “recruit” schools. The pilot was a resounding success, resulting in nine service-learning restoration projects. So this year, armed with the “package”, Fort Stevens State Park Ranger, Nadine Stilwell, approached her neighborhood school in Warrenton-and Jan Schock offered the training to her staff. What began as a small group quickly became the entire school, with teachers planning trail building, invasive removal, butterfly gardens, setting interpretive signage. Schock even approached the high school to join in.

Sixty-three student service-learning projects, in 25 communities around Oregon are already underway as part of this year's *Down By the Riverside* event.

Conclusion

Service-learning can be an effective strategy in changing both the way students learn and the way they involve themselves within their community. Bringing together school and community, service-learning helps students expand their opportunities for learning into the world around them, at the same time as it invites the community into the learning process. The emerging research is already showing benefits as more motivated and engaged youth, who see their learning within a meaningful context, add new energy and commitment to their community.

The organizations and agencies that act as community partners are equal stakeholders to the school in the success of the service-learning experience. Strengthening the community partner will enhance the whole partnership. Attention to the preparation, training and development of support for the community partner demands additional consideration by all service-learning advocates.

Endnotes

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About the Author

Susan Abravanel, author of the paper, is the education director at SOLV, an Oregon nonprofit organization and a community partner in service-learning opportunities throughout the state.

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Oregon students, teachers and community-based organizations



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