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Service-Learning in Afterschool: Helping Students Grow and Communities Prosper

The Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with MetLife Foundation, is proud to present the third in a series of four issue briefs examining critical issues facing middle school youth and the vital role afterschool programs play in addressing these issues. These issue briefs feature: the importance of aligning afterschool with the school day; bullying awareness and prevention; service-learning opportunities for middle schoolers; and literacy education. They examine just a few of the ways afterschool programs support middle school youth, families and communities.

More than 1 in 4 eighth grade students in the U.S. volunteer each year, and the benefits of these altruistic acts stretch far beyond their immediate impacts on students' communities.ⁱ Studies have shown that adolescents who volunteer are less likely to use drugsⁱⁱ and more likely to succeed academically, while also developing a strong work ethic for the future.ⁱⁱⁱ With these benefits in mind, it seems imperative that youth become involved in volunteering at an early age in order to develop an understanding of its importance for the future. Creating a corps of compassionate leaders for the future will ensure that the disadvantaged and downtrodden will continue to have a voice and a helping hand when they are in need. As awareness of the disparity between the world's most wealthy citizens and its least fortunate has grown recently, so too has the understanding that an act of service — whether it's volunteering at a local foodbank or developing a campaign to aid the hungry in Somalia — can go a long way in reducing inequity and promoting global prosperity. Youth are the future torchbearers for these causes, and so engaging children of all ages in volunteering, and more importantly, allowing them to create their own service projects, is vital to the betterment of their communities, country and the world at large.

Children in middle school are particularly well-positioned, as both ardent learners with curious imaginations and able-minded young leaders, to grow immensely from volunteering and developing service projects. However, too often it is difficult for students to find service-learning opportunities within the school day. Uniquely positioned as a learning space that is separate from—yet connected to—the school day, afterschool programs can impart important lessons about service to middle school youth while also tying in school day lessons. The combination of service-learning and afterschool offers benefits not only to students' surrounding communities, but also to their own academic and social development. With the help of afterschool mentors, middle school students can take their volunteering to the next level. They can go from volunteers to active service learners. In the afterschool space, middle schoolers are afforded the guidance and flexibility to become true agents of change in their community while also becoming more socially conscious leaders for the future.

"By its very definition, civic responsibility means taking a healthy role in the life of one's community, state and nation. That means that classroom lessons should be complemented by work outside the classroom. Service-learning does just that, tying community service to academic lessons."

Former U.S. Senator and Astronaut John Glenn

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Community Service vs. Service-Learning

As stated above, community service in all forms has great benefits for those who get involved. However service-learning, which incorporates meaningful community service with learning objectives and reflections,^{iv} has potentially even more powerful advantages for middle school youth. The differences between community service and service-learning lie primarily in the focus on direct learning objectives in service-learning, but with various definitions for both terms, there are a number of key ways in which they differ:

<i>Service-Learning</i>	<i>Community Service</i>
Includes an academic component	Typically does not have an academic focus
Allows youth to plan their own service projects with group discussions 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 ^v
Includes reflection on the project goals and outcomes through discussions, writing or presentations	Reflection is not an essential focus
Example: Students in a middle school environmental science program help preserve the natural habitat of animals living in a nearby forest	Example: Students take part in a community-wide park clean up event developed by the mayor's office ^{vi}

While both types of service are extremely valuable to students and the community at large, service-learning offers students the ability to truly learn and grow from their experiences and offers them the opportunity to directly create positive change with projects they conceptualize and carry out.

Benefits of Service-Learning

With its blend of enhanced social awareness and supplemental academic enrichment, service-learning can offer students a multitude of varied benefits. Not only does it present an enhanced and more practical understanding of school-day lessons, but it also provides opportunities for students to grow socially and emotionally.^{vii} When middle schoolers learn through hands-on service-learning projects that they have developed themselves, the potential for learning and development is limitless:

Academic Gains

- More than two thirds of students in a Flint, MI, service-learning program reported that their participation helped them understand what they were learning in school and improved their academic achievement.^{viii}
- Michigan service-learning students in grades 7-12 reported more engagement and more effort in English/language arts classes than nonparticipants.^{ix}
- Sixth grade service-learning participants in New Hampshire demonstrated significant gains in achievement scores on state assessments compared to their own performance before participating in service-learning.^x

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- One study found that involvement in service can contribute to lessening the achievement gap, with low-income students who serve doing better academically than students who do not serve.^{xi}

Social and Emotional Impacts

- In a study of sixth, seventh and eighth-graders, students with substantial hours of service-learning, including reflection and a high degree of motivation, significantly increased their self-concept concerning helping others and maintained their commitment to class work at a higher rate than those with less service-learning participation.^{xii}
- A study of Wisconsin service-learning project participants found that middle school students reported lower rates of certain risk behaviors, higher levels of leadership and ability to resist danger, higher levels of positive peer influence, higher rates of homework and school engagement, higher interpersonal competence, and increased involvement in service to others.^{xiii}
- Compared to their peers, young adults who participated in K-12 service-learning were more likely to discuss politics or community issues and vote in an election year; more politically and socially connected to their communities, both as leaders and role models; and more active members of society.^{xiv}

“Service-learning has been shown to keep students engaged in school and to boost student academic achievement.”

U.S. Senator Orrin Hatch (UT)

How Afterschool Programs are Promoting Service-Learning

Currently service-learning takes place in only 32 percent of public schools across the U.S.^{xv} With more and more time being devoted to core academic subjects and a stronger focus on standardized testing in recent years, enrichment activities, including service-learning opportunities, have become less prevalent in school day learning. Therefore, afterschool programs have become more important than ever as providers of enrichment that is linked with, but separate from, the school day. Afterschool is perfectly positioned to fulfill middle schooler’s service-learning needs and to develop better students now and stronger service advocates for the future. There are a number of innovative ways that afterschool programs across the country are providing service-learning for middle school students:

Afterschool programs can offer mentors to guide middle schoolers in developing service-learning projects for their communities. When students see role models act as social change agents, they are inspired to dedicate their learning to service.

YouthCity in Salt Lake City, UT, offers project-based service-learning opportunities for middle-school age youth in which college students serve as mentors to help participants shape and develop their service-learning projects. YouthCity partners with Westminster College to develop mutually beneficial service-learning experiences for the youth and undergraduate and graduate students. The volunteer mentors from Westminster College offer positive role models for the middle-school-age youth. With their help, middle schoolers have developed public awareness messages addressing air pollution; demonstrated the impact of pollution on the ecology,

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biodiversity, and water quality of Liberty Lake; and volunteered to plant, care for and harvest produce they have grown themselves. YouthCity provides middle-school-age youth a variety of service learning opportunities that integrate community service with instruction, offer enriching learning opportunities, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen the greater Salt Lake City community.

A dedication to developing skills and enhancing knowledge is at the crux of service-learning. Afterschool programs offer the flexibility for students to take to the streets to enact fully-informed service projects that truly get to the heart of community needs while also imparting important skills that can help them in the future.

Baltimore Speaks Out! in Maryland is a media literacy and production program in which middle school students create videos about issues relevant to their lives and communities. This model of service-learning promotes 21st-century thinking, makes young people aware of issues impacting their communities, builds teamwork and media literacy skills, and encourages young people to become active citizens. At Baltimore Speaks Out!, students work as a team to create a media project to help solve or create awareness about an important issue in their community. Students identify issues that are personally important to them, providing for projects that truly reflect each student's personality and passions. Past projects have focused on school bullying, gang activity, the impacts of gentrification, pollution and police surveillance. In the course of creating the projects, students engage in critical discussions, conduct online research, interview community members or relevant stakeholders, do reflective writing exercises and determine how to communicate their findings in an engaging way through media. One of the most unique and vital parts of the BSO program is that it allows youth to explore their personal connections to the community issues they are examining, and with this, youth develop a passion for social justice that they never knew existed.

Afterschool programs allow students to become leaders, providing a space where youth development is essential to helping the program grow and where youth voices are not only heard, but also utilized in the advancement of program goals.

Fresh Youth Initiatives in New York, NY, provides at-risk youth with opportunities to connect with their community and to become concerned, active citizens. The program's service-learning model helps middle schoolers to develop the skills, values and resiliency they will need to overcome barriers to success in the future. Fresh Youth Initiatives is a comprehensive program that offers homework help and recreational activities while also dedicating time to service projects each day. The program's projects include a wide range of activities, from volunteering at a food pantry to graffiti clean-up. The most important aspect of each activity comes at the conclusion when participants reflect and are offered time to draw connections between their work and their ability to be social change agents. The program directly benefits more than 2,000 community members and provides over 10,000 hours of community service each program year. By eighth grade, Fresh Youth Initiatives participants are encouraged to work with program staff to identify needs in the community and design their own service project. In this way, they learn first-hand about the importance of positive social change and they take on increasing responsibility in responding to issues.

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The afterschool space presents youth with an unparalleled opportunity to plan, discuss and reflect on their service-learning goals and outcomes. When youth succeed in carrying out a service to their community that is linked with school-day lessons, they are afforded unequalled self-confidence and respect as educated social change agents in their community.

Kids Rethink New Orleans Schools in Louisiana is an afterschool program consisting of a network of middle school students “rethinking” their schools and contributing to their community. The program includes youth from 15 New Orleans public schools and focuses on identifying changes necessary to improving schools in their community. The program includes five student action committees: Oil-Free Schools/Architecture, Food Justice/School Gardens, Restorative Justice, Documentary Photography and Digital Media. Each committee is dedicated to analyzing each issue and conceptualizing and carrying out a plan to fix it. The program is uniquely youth-driven. Students identify the issues that matter to them and then staffers connect them with professionals—such as chefs, artists, media experts or architects—to develop creative solutions. Since 2006, Rethink youth have successfully convinced school officials to repair 350 substandard bathrooms; install sinks for hand washing in all new school cafeterias; add garden plots to all future school designs; and serve significantly more fresh food. Additionally, students have spoken at conferences across the country and have earned a reputation as a group that gets things done in New Orleans. In support of the program, Superintendent Paul Vallas noted, “A lot of people come to us with problems, but not very many come with solutions. The Rethinkers come to me with solutions and I have no choice but to listen to them.”

“Service-learning allows students to apply classroom content and problem-solving skills to identified community or school needs. This not only enhances the community, but provides a powerful learning experience for our young people.”

David Price (NC), U.S. House of Representatives

Conclusion

Pairing service with academic enrichment can support youth success in many ways. Middle schoolers in particular can benefit greatly from the improved self-confidence and learning gains afforded by service-learning opportunities. Afterschool programs interested in providing service-learning for students must be mindful of the important blend of providing community service opportunities along with an academic component. Whereas community service activities allow youth to develop and apply their skills and knowledge to real-life situations and enhance 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 and a brighter future, and highlights an example of how afterschool benefits children, schools and their communities.

ⁱ Child Trends. *Table 1: Students who volunteer at least once per month by grade level, 1991-2009*. Retrieved from http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/sites/default/files/20_Volunteering_tab01.jpg.

ⁱⁱ National Commission on Service Learning. (2001). *The power of service learning for American schools*. Retrieved from http://nslp.convio.net/site/DocServer/executive_summary.pdf?docID=1202.

ⁱⁱⁱ Zaff, J. F., & Michelsen, E. (2002). *Encouraging civic engagement: How teens are (or are not) becoming responsible citizens*. Child Trends. Retrieved from http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2002_10_01_RB_CivicEngagement.pdf.

^{iv} The San Francisco Department of Children Youth and Their Families. (2010). *Service learning in afterschool: In*

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- San Francisco*. Retrieved from <http://www.dcyf.org/assets/609dc672a2ca4aa8ae785905a475ef25.pdf>.
- ^v Academic Community Service Learning Program. Community service vs. service learning. North Carolina Central University. Retrieved from http://www.nccu.edu/administration/academicaffairs/acslp/community/com_difference.cfm.
- ^{vi} Skinner, R. & Chapman, C. (1999). *Service-learning and community service in K-12 public schools*. National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs99/1999043.pdf>.
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- ^{ix} Billig, S. H., & Klute, M. M. (2003). *The impact of service-learning on MEAP: A large-scale study of Michigan Learn and Serve grantees*. Presentation at National Service-Learning Conference, Minneapolis, MN.
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- ^{xii} Scales, P. C., Blyth, D. A., Berkas, T. H., & Kielsmeier, J. C. (2000, August). *The effects of service-learning on middle school students' social responsibility and academic success*. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 20 (3), 332–358.
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- ^{xiv} Martin, S., Neal, M., Kielsmeier, J., & Crossley, A. (2006). *The impact of service-learning on transitions to adulthood*. In J. Kielsmeier, M. Neal, and A. Crossley (Eds.), *Growing to Greatness 2006: The State of Service-Learning Project*. Saint Paul, MN: National Youth Leadership Council.
- ^{xv} Skinner, R. & Chapman, C. (1999). *Service-learning and community service in K-12 public schools*. National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs99/1999043.pdf>.

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