

## SERVICE



## Enhancing future prospects through foundational skills and competencies

Vibrant social connections and robust community involvement are part of what makes a strong America. Yet, among our nation's young people, there are relatively low levels of community engagement. While acts of service that elementary schoolers take part in will look different than service among young adults, there is a way for all individuals, regardless of age, to engage in service, and individuals, regardless of age, can benefit from acts of service. For children and youth, service learning is an established method to bring youth closer to their communities while also promoting positive youth development outcomes. Among young adults, service, such as national service, enables them to make similar personal and professional gains when given the opportunity to participate. The afterschool field is a critical partner to expand access and availability of service in a multitude of forms for youth and young adults alike. Together with education and community leaders, afterschool and summer learning programs are working toward the healthy development of both the next generation and our democracy.

### Overview

**Civic Nebraska** is a nonprofit organization driven by the mission to create a more modern and robust democracy for all Nebraskans. Part of building a body of civically-informed and active citizens begins with empowering and engaging youth. To meet this objective, Civic Nebraska designed Youth Civic Leadership programming for elementary and middle school students in Lincoln and Omaha's high-poverty neighborhoods. These programs use service learning and community leadership as tools to encourage students to invest in themselves and their communities.

### A typical day for students

Students meet every afternoon at the Community Learning Center based on their school campus. Program leaders run a stimulating three-hour program broken down by grade level and split into three major components: a full healthy meal, academic support, and enriching extension activities like STEM, physical activity, and service learning. Periodic field trips and themed community or family nights complement regular afterschool programming.

## Civic Nebraska

Lincoln, Neb.

**1600** Average number of students served during the school year:

**81%** Students from low-income families

### Main funding sources:

- ▶ 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers
- ▶ Corporate donations and grants
- ▶ Foundation grants
- ▶ Private donations
- ▶ Fundraising

## Outcomes

Program staff report that participation in Civic Nebraska's afterschool Youth Civic Leadership programs help youth become engaged, curious, and civically-minded students, in part by helping to expand the minds of students beyond what they may have experienced otherwise. Program staff also see increased positive behavior, confidence, and excitement to learn in program participants over time.

## Program characteristics

Civic Nebraska champions authentic service learning as a transformative skill-building experience for elementary and middle school students. The Youth Civic Leadership program curriculum incorporates best practices for high-quality service learning, as defined by the National Youth Leadership Council. This includes coordinating service-learning lessons with state standards and school improvement plans to support student academic success. Program leaders also promote hands-on youth-driven projects to reinforce youth voice. By encouraging youth to take initiative, critically think through issues, and make educated decisions about how to solve community problems, Civic Nebraska's afterschool service-learning program builds confident civic leaders with strong academic and employment skills.

A recent service-learning project blossomed out of an underused community garden adjacent to the students' school. Program participants recognized the value and potential of this space, and collaborated with community partners to create a community garden that has produced more than 1,000 donated meals. To initiate and maintain the community garden, students



## Challenges

Despite the positive impacts of service, the desire to be a positive force in the community is not translating into action.

**Service opportunities at school: for some, not all.** While trends show an increasing number of community involvement opportunities offered by schools and universities—for instance, 68 percent of principals reported that their students participate in community activities that are recognized by the schools, and 69 percent of college seniors participated in a service-learning course in 2018—too many individuals are not accessing these opportunities.

**The type of service matters.** A growing body of research shows the positive benefits associated with service. However, the majority of youth service opportunities are rooted in volunteering, rather than service learning, with the percentage of schools offering service learning declining from 32 percent in 1999 to 24 percent in 2008.

**The equity divide.** Participation in opportunities for service varies across different socio-economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, based on the availability and access to surrounding institutions that facilitate and encourage service. For example, schools in low-income areas, often serving a larger percentage of minority students, are less likely to offer service learning when compared with other schools. For low-income young adults, in school and in the workforce, monetary and non-monetary costs of service act as a barrier to participation.

Read [Afterschool Supports Service Opportunities from Youth to Young Adulthood](#) to learn more.



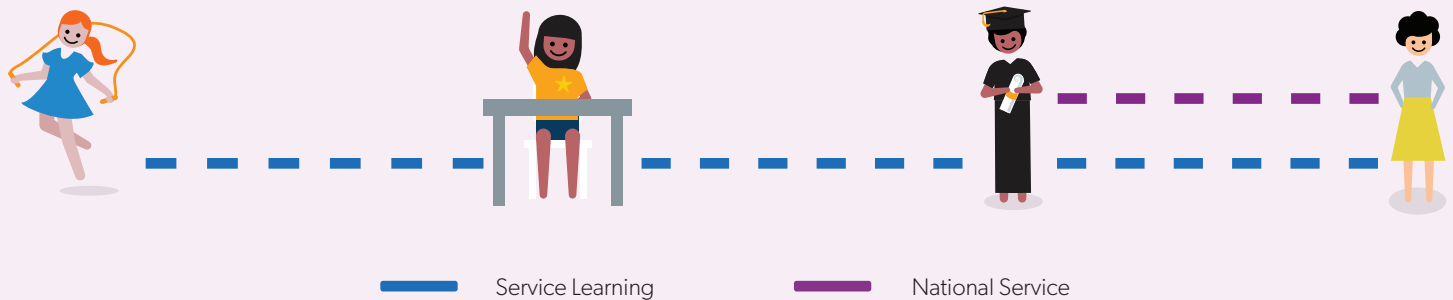
## Service Opportunities at Every Age

Everyone, regardless of age, can take part in service. The service opportunity may look different depending on one's age, but the positive benefits are a constant. In addition to meeting the needs of a community, acts of service can foster greater community engagement, trust, a better understanding of the community, and compassion for others.

### Service Learning

Through service learning, youth are active participants in thoughtfully organized community projects that advance a set of learning goals while meeting the needs of the community. For example, students in an afterschool program study their city's waste collection and recycling services. Students then plan and implement a series of local cleanup projects to apply their lessons on accessibility and use of these services. In addition to students helping with litter abatement and beautification efforts, the community is presented with students' sustainable waste management recommendations.

Example adapted from [Loyola University](#).



### National Service

For young adults, service can also be a deeper form of experiential education through longer-term service projects that provide formative hands-on opportunities to assess and address community needs. For example, AmeriCorps State and National members placed at an afterschool program make a yearlong commitment to directly serve youth and their families. Members grow professionally, learn about the community they are serving, and support students' development. Students in programs benefit from AmeriCorps members' tutoring and mentorship. Afterschool programs benefit by receiving help with child enrichment activities and overall program implementation.

had to practice skills that include resilience in the face of obstacles, like failed crops; communicating instructions or techniques; and cooperation with peers as well as community members. As students planted seeds and cultivated crops, they also learned about the science of agronomy, cooking, how greenhouses operate, and the farm-to-table process. This blended learning approach helped students grasp the broader impact of their community-service initiatives and understand their influence as community members.

### Program history

In 2008, executive director Adam Morfeld founded Civic Nebraska out of his dorm room, with the support of a passionate and politically diverse group of peers. In slightly more than 10 years, the organization has grown to more than 80 full- and part-time employees that enhance civic engagement across the state. Civic Nebraska runs four afterschool programs, called Community Learning Centers, at Sherman Elementary, Lothrop Elementary, Campbell Elementary, and Lewis and Clark Middle School in Lincoln and Omaha.

### Recommendations

*for enhancing future prospects through foundational skills and competencies:*

- ▶ Avoid a cookie-cutter approach to service learning. Mold your service-learning program to meet the specific needs of your students and your community, and take into consideration the resources available to you. For example, an afterschool program held at a STEM magnet elementary school has access to materials that enable a science-based service project.
- ▶ Elevate your service-learning program by embedding a strong curriculum that connects to school day learning.



**Afterschool Alliance**

[afterschoolalliance.org](http://afterschoolalliance.org)