

# Service-Learning with Disadvantaged Youth

Source: Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, Search Institute, December 2007

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## Service-Learning with Disadvantaged Youth

On average, it's harder to grow up well when you live in poverty. Indeed, low socioeconomic status (SES) is negatively linked to a wide range of indicators of child and adolescent well-being. At the same time, growing up poor does not seal one's destiny. Service-learning can be an important strategy for building strengths and resources into young people's lives.

## Benefits of Service-Learning for Disadvantaged Youth

Young people from disadvantaged circumstances benefit from participation in quality service-learning in a number of different ways, including the following:

- They tend to have a greater commitment to learning and better school attendance, grades, and academic success than low-income students who did not participate.
- They tend to be more likely to believe they are contributing to the community, to be engaged in learning, and other positive outcomes.
- They tend to demonstrate more positive civic attitudes and behaviors than youth from their peers who do not volunteer.

## The Opportunity Gap

Despite the value of service-learning for disadvantaged youth, they are less likely to have opportunities to serve others.

- Only 43% of youth from disadvantaged circumstances volunteer, compared to 59% for other youth.
- Schools and community-based organizations serving youth in disadvantaged circumstances are less likely to provide service-learning opportunities.
- Youth from low-income circumstances are less likely to be asked to serve.

## Engaging Disadvantaged Youth in Service-Learning

Here are some starting points for reflection and action about how to reach and include young people from disadvantaged circumstances:

*Examine assumptions and stereotypes*—Young people from disadvantaged circumstances are more often seen as liabilities, not resources. Strength-based understandings of youth development offer resources and strategies aimed at viewing all young people as resources, regardless of their socioeconomic background, resources, race/ethnicity, or other differences.

*Diversify leadership*—Service-learning is perceived to have well-educated, middle-class, and white leadership. Finding ways to broaden leadership will offer young people more role models to motivate and guide them into a lifetime of service.

*Be intentional about diversity issues*—Service-learning programs will more effectively engage diverse youth by reflecting on and sharing cultural values, emphasizing each young person's capacity to serve, helping young people work toward a common goal,



helping to enlarge young people's perspectives, and promoting humane values.

*Use effective service-learning practices*—Because of past experiences and the potential for mistrust, it can be helpful to emphasize key elements of effective service-learning:

- Create a group environment in which young people feel safe and well-connected, and like they belong.
- Invite them to identify the issues and concerns that they want to address.
- Set clear boundaries and expectations for behavior.
- Challenge them to use their gifts, talents, and energy to do benefit others.
- Increase their responsibilities as they have early successes.
- Invite responsible adults to serve as mentors, role models, and guides.

*Be intentional about diversity issues*—Service-learning programs will more effectively engage diverse youth by reflecting on and sharing cultural values, emphasizing each young person's capacity to serve, helping young people work toward a common goal, helping to enlarge young people's perspectives, and promoting humane values.

*Engage trusted institutions and networks*—Youth from disadvantaged circumstances likely trust and are engaged in some institutions more than others. The only institutions where disadvantaged youth are *more likely* than other youth to provide service, for example, are faith-based organizations. Thus, these institutions may be particularly important allies in ensuring that disadvantaged youth have quality opportunities for service-learning.

*Embed service-learning into the core curriculum or program*, rather than as optional activities. Simply providing more optional activities does not necessarily increase equity by reaching those who are currently not participating. Integrating service-learning into core curriculum is more likely to engage those young people who are least likely to connect otherwise.

*Increase funding for service-learning for youth in disadvantaged circumstances.* High-quality service-learning often requires extra resources, so better-funded programs and districts can afford to provide more and better opportunities.

*Integrate young people together.* One of the dangers in highlighting youth from disadvantaged circumstances as a focus for service-learning is that it could inadvertently fuel additional programs that label and further isolate these young people in their communities. Service-learning projects can be opportunities for all young people to participate on equal footing and build relationships across differences.

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*For a more detailed discussion, including references and documentation, see the complete online fact sheet at*

[http://www.servicelearning.org/instant\\_info/fact\\_sheets/cb\\_facts/disadvantaged\\_youth/expanded.php](http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/cb_facts/disadvantaged_youth/expanded.php)

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