

Service-Learning: Helping Kids and Communities Grow

When learning is linked to the real world, it's naturally more rewarding. Students who have the opportunity to address genuine community needs see firsthand that their actions can improve the quality of life for others. Education becomes more meaningful and empowering, and their self-esteem flourishes. In addition, as kids become active members of their communities, they also learn what being a socially responsible citizen looks and feels like.

The concept behind this vision — dubbed service learning — goes beyond students simply doing community service.



Service learning explicitly weaves community service with curriculum goals so that learning; personal, social, and civic skills; and communities are strengthened.

These relationships also help schools build bridges to the community and help local people better understand and support educational goals.

Across the country, garden and habitat projects are inspiring students to connect with and serve their communities. They create plantings that reflect a community's diverse cultures, build intergenerational partnerships, involve neighbors in schoolyard planning, teach citizens about recycling waste, share harvests with populations in need, and create urban oases for respite and renewal. And that's just for starters.

Program Spotlight: Project Climate Club

Students in the Project Climate Club at Heritage High School in Brentwood, CA, saw the destruction caused by wildfires. They decided to take action by growing native oak trees from seed to help replenish fire-ravaged forests. Learn more:

<https://kidsgardening.org/program-spotlights-project-climate-club/>

Service-Learning Project Ideas

The following are examples of garden-related projects that can help both kids and communities flourish. These examples can also serve as a jumping-off point to investigating what would work best for your community and students:

- Explore local food heritage by interviewing families and community members about culturally relevant plants, foods, gardening methods, and recipes. Create a garden, visitor's guide, and cookbook reflecting the cultural diversity of the community.

Program Spotlight: Cheyenne River Youth Project

Located in Eagle Butte, South Dakota, the Cheyenne River Youth Project is connecting local youth to their Lakota culture and heritage through a diverse array of garden- and food-based programming. They also host a native food sovereignty internship.

Learn more: <https://kidsgardening.org/program-spotlights-cheyenne-river-youth-project/>

- Extend a school pollinator garden project by educating community members how to enhance and protect habitats. Incorporate interpretive signs, a field guide for visitors, and materials describing how citizens can protect and support pollinators and other local wildlife.
- Establish native vegetation on school grounds. Create a video to educate parents, students, residents, news media, and the local government about the importance of native species.
- Write newsletters and articles to make the community aware of waste management issues and teach people about composting. Hold composting demonstrations in the schoolyard.
- Setup a community garden on school grounds and rent plots at reasonable prices to neighbors. Intergenerational friendships and learning take off as students and seniors tend plots and serve as mentors to one another.

Program spotlight: The Bellaire School

Students from Bellaire School in Queens Village, NY, were inspired by the power and meaning of American artist Robert Indiana's iconic 1966 "Love" sculpture and painting. They decided that their garden should strive to offer meaning, too. The students were growing wheatgrass to make nutritious smoothies. To extend their love to creatures in need, they donating some of their wheatgrass plants to a local animal rescue shelter for their cats to nibble on.

Learn more: <https://kidsgardening.org/kg-program-spotlights-ps-135q-the-bellaire-school/>

Getting Started with Service-Learning

At its core, service-learning involves kids in assessing community needs (or problems), collaborating to propose solutions, and taking action. How you approach this will depend on your unique context, teaching goals, and students' developmental levels. For instance, young students might take on a simple project, such as bringing homegrown flowers to nursing home residents and swapping stories. Older students might tackle an in-depth project aimed at addressing environmental challenges plaguing the community. In either case, here are some factors you should consider.

Planning and Taking Action

Some teachers start by reviewing learning goals (ideally, with students) and then identifying community projects that would meet local needs *and* support learning. In other cases, students take the lead, identifying a need or problem in the community that sparks their interest and the teacher (or class) examines how to integrate curricular goals with the proposed project.

Before fleshing out a plan, students may need to further assess local needs or problems, research their scope, find out who is addressing the issues, and identify local resources and partnerships to support the process. Consider these questions as you plan and move forward.

- What are my curriculum goals and how can I integrate them with a service-learning project?
- Does the proposed project address a genuine community need?
- How will students gain the content knowledge required to carry out the project?
- How will I organize students to work collaboratively to accomplish tasks and solve problems?
- How will we make the experience meaningful for students and community members?
- How will the project help students learn about their community and its resources?
- How will I ensure that students have a voice in selecting, planning, and carrying out the project?
- How will I make learning goals and tasks clear at each stage?
- How will I assess student gains?

Program Spotlight: Indian Run Elementary

Students at Indian Run Elementary School in Dublin, Ohio, are providing their local food pantry with a nutritious supply of fresh fruits and vegetables. Over 700 students and 50 volunteer families grow approximately 200 pounds of food each year to share with members of the community. The garden is closely integrated into the school's curriculum, including science, math, art, reading, health, and special education. Learn more: <https://kidsgardening.org/program-spotlights-indian-run-elementary/>

Reflecting on the Process

By providing opportunities for student reflection during the course of a service-learning project (via discussions, writing, presentations, and artistic projects), you enable students to process and apply what they've learned, including:

- insights about themselves
- new knowledge about their communities
- challenges of effecting change
- approaches to problem-solving
- academic concepts



When you ask such questions as, *What worked well? What can be improved? How can we use what we've learned?* and *What new questions or "ahas" do we have?* you help students think critically and build meaning from their experiences.

Celebrating Success

It's good practice to wrap up a service-learning project by creating opportunities to recognize the contributions and achievements of students and project partners. These might include soliciting media coverage, holding a community event (e.g., community garden dedication), or having a school-wide awards ceremony.

More Program Spotlights

Hope Grows

Teachers Mary Montes and Marisa Truselo at Tamaques Elementary School in Westfield, NJ, noticed a common subject/theme between the two grade levels and created a collaborative project for 1st and 5th Grade Kindness Buddies, with learning opportunities that supported both academic and personal growth. By the end of the year, students gained important gardening skills, in depth knowledge of habitats, and an understanding of the importance of attitude and perseverance when faced with adversity.

Learn more: <https://kidsgardening.org/kg-program-spotlights-hope-grows/>

Follow the Pollinators to Our Garden!

Students at Johnsbury High School in Johnsbury, IL, wanted to teach their peers and the community about the beauty and significance of plants and pollinators. Through artwork, starting a native plant garden, and volunteering at local food shelf, the student-led program created a greater sense of community and purpose for our students while filling a need in their community.

Learn more: <https://kidsgardening.org/program-spotlights-follow-the-pollinators-to-our-garden/>

Native Plant Garden

Students at Morton Freshman Center in Cicero, IL, decided to create a native plant garden and monarch habitat. They designed the garden, and then had to figure out how to take the design and build it to scale. It truly was a student-led project from beginning to end. In addition to academic skills, the students had a chance to practice a number of valuable life skills that will help them greatly after graduation, such as teamwork, communication and leadership skills.

Learn more: <https://kidsgardening.org/program-spotlights-morton-freshman-center/>

St. Clair Superior Development Corporation

They host summer workforce development programs for teens on topics ranging from gardening and cooking to voter registration.

Learn more: <https://kidsgardening.org/program-spotlights-for-teens-by-teens/>

Promise of Peace Gardens

Folks participate in cooking programming then receive the supplies needed to cook their own meals/share meals with the community.

Learn more: <https://kidsgardening.org/program-spotlights-promise-of-peace-garden/>

