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Service-Learning in K-12 Public Education

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Service-learning is a curriculum-based form of community service that integrates classroom instruction and reflection with hands-on service experiences. While the number of schools organizing service-learning activities has not yet surpassed the large percentage of K-12 institutions that simply offer or organize community service, the pedagogy has experienced a surge in popularity over the past decade and is becoming an increasingly prevalent practice in public school classrooms. As of February 2004, over 10 percent of all K-12 public school students and 28 percent of all K-12 public institutions are involved in some type of service-learning, affecting approximately 4.7 million K-12 students in 23,000 public schools.² This fact sheet offers a glimpse at the state of service-learning in public education today.

What is service-learning?

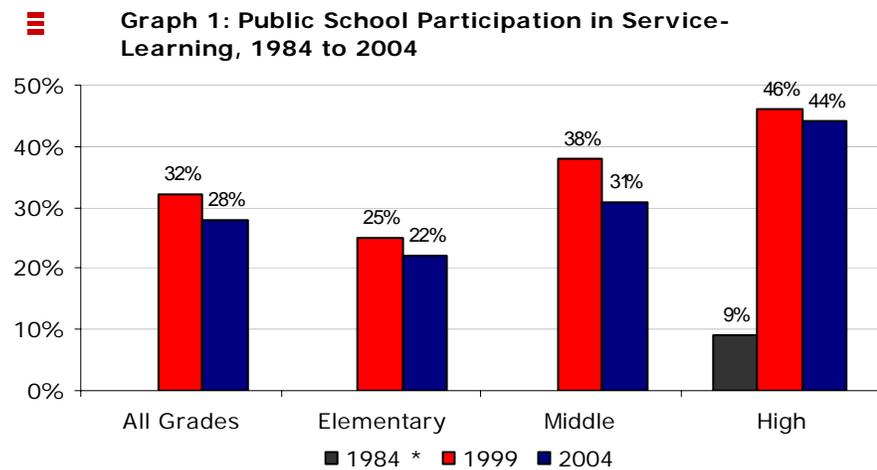
Although the educational practice of uniting community and classroom activities has been in existence for over a century, it has only been in recent years that a national service-learning movement has taken shape, and the concept of service-learning has become widely discussed among educators, policymakers, and scholars. Despite recent efforts to reach a common definition of service-learning,³ confusion still persists among researchers, the public, and policymakers about the differences between service-learning and community service. Service-learning advocates claim that while community service programs are an add-on to the curriculum, service-learning attempts to go beyond mere service by intentionally connecting service experiences to academic outcomes, providing a context for classroom learning, and helping students draw meaningful lessons from their service experiences.⁴ While many practitioners use these terms interchangeably, most scholars agree that projects must meet minimum standards to be considered an effective service-learning project rather than simply a community service component attached to a class. In addition to curricular integration, the major components of service-learning include a response to real community needs over a sustained period of time, youth decision-making and participation in the design of the

project, and regular reflection and analysis (through journals, group discussion, and papers) to assist students in drawing lessons from the service.⁵

Participation in service-learning

Tracking public school participation in service-learning over the past several decades is not an easy task, considering that almost all research studies taking place before the 1990's did not draw clear distinctions between service-learning and community service. One exception is Fred Newmann and Robert Rutter's 1984 survey of high school community service programs across the United States, which did measure participation in "curriculum-related" community service, finding that a mere 9 percent of high schools offered academic credit for service activities.⁶

The first national study to provide reliable estimates of K-12 participation in service-learning, *Service-Learning and Community Service in K-12 Public Schools*, was conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 1999. This benchmark study found that 32 percent of all schools employed service-learning.⁷



Sources: 1984 data from "A Profile of High School Community Service Programs;" 1999 data from "Service-Learning and Community Service in K-12 Public Schools;" 2004 data from "Community Service and Service-Learning in U.S. Public Schools"

A follow-up survey commissioned by the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) in 2004, *Community Service and Service-Learning in US Public Schools*, replicated NCES's 1999 survey and extended the research to provide a better picture of the scope and depth of service-learning in K-12 public schools. To date, it is the most extensive service-learning survey available. Interestingly, the study showed a small but meaningful drop in service-learning participation by public schools over the past five years. As shown in Graph 1, the percentage of public schools participating in service-learning has declined at every school level from 1999 to 2004, with the largest drop occurring at the middle school level. However, these recent declines in participation may be explained by the stringent achievement levels and compliance codes that went into effect with the No Child Left Behind Act of

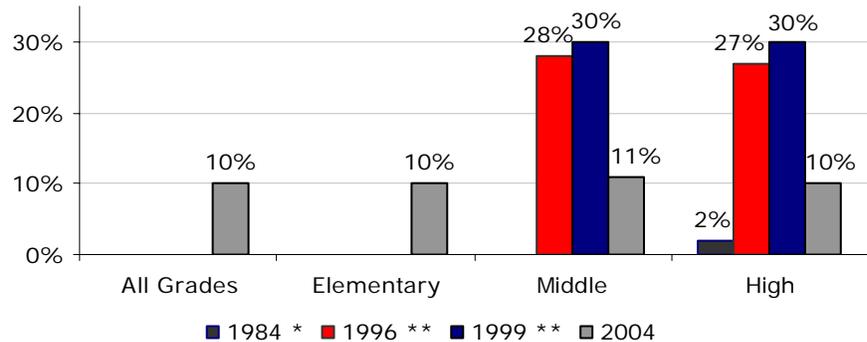
2001, and may not necessarily reflect declining interest in or support for service-learning.⁸

As of 2004, service-learning is significantly more likely to be employed at the high school level than at other grades. However, as shown in Graph 1, almost a third of middle schools and a fourth of elementary schools in 2004 reported using service-learning.

Estimating the percentage of public school students involved in service-learning is equally difficult due to a shortage of reliable research. In addition to the estimates of Newmann and Rutter in 1984 and NYLC in 2004, the only major additional source to estimate the number of students in K-12 public schools engaged in service-learning has been NCES's National Household Education Surveys of 1996 and 1999.⁹

Issues in measurement also result from the various definitions of service-learning used in these three surveys. Although it appears in Graph 2 that the percentage of students participating in service-learning has experienced a major decline in the last decade, dropping almost 20 percent at the middle and high school level, this assumption may be misleading. The NCES studies of 1996 and 1999 defined service-learning as participating in a community service activity while simultaneously engaging in one or a combination of three academic activities: talking about the service in a class, keeping a journal or writing about the service activity, or receiving a grade based on the service activity. To be considered service-learning in 2004, however, community service projects were required to meet more rigorous standards.¹⁰

Graph 2: Student Participation In Service- Learning, 1984 to 2004



* 1984 data available for high school students only

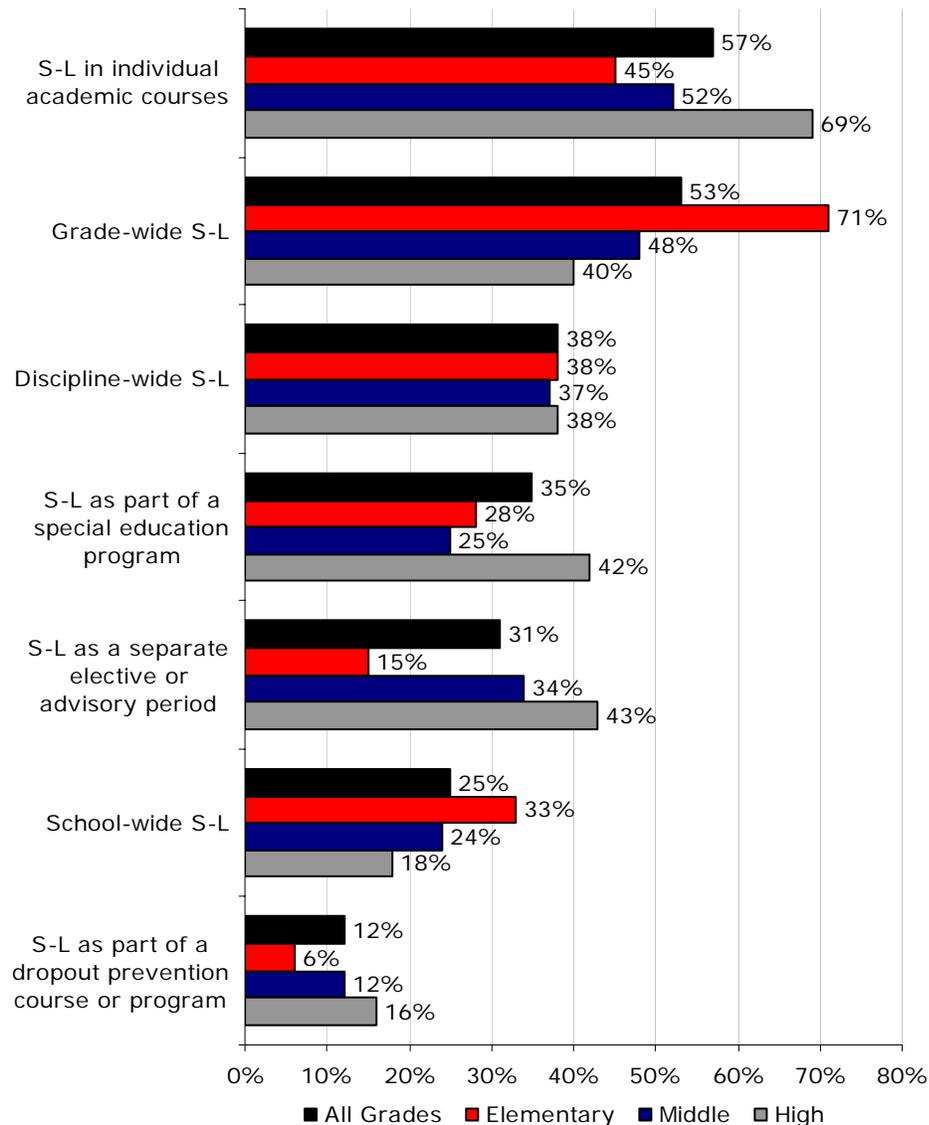
** 1996 and 1999 data available for middle and high

Sources: 1984 data from "A Profile of High School Community Service Programs;" 1996 and 1999 data from "Youth Service-Learning and Community Service Among 6th- Through 12th- Grade Students in the United States;" 2004 data from "Community Service and Service-Learning in U.S. Public Schools"

Integration of service-learning into schools

While 32 percent of K-12 institutions report using service-learning, projects and programs vary along several dimensions within individual schools. For example, schools can implement service-learning on the classroom level or construct larger-scale initiatives, as well as design programs to meet specific needs or segments of the school population. As shown in Graph 3, service-learning is most likely to be used at the classroom level (involving only students in a particular course or courses), or as part of a grade-wide initiative (involving all students in one or more grades). However, there are distinct differences in the way schools at different levels choose to implement service-learning. High schools are far more likely to use service-learning in individual courses, while grade-wide initiatives are the most common technique at the elementary level.

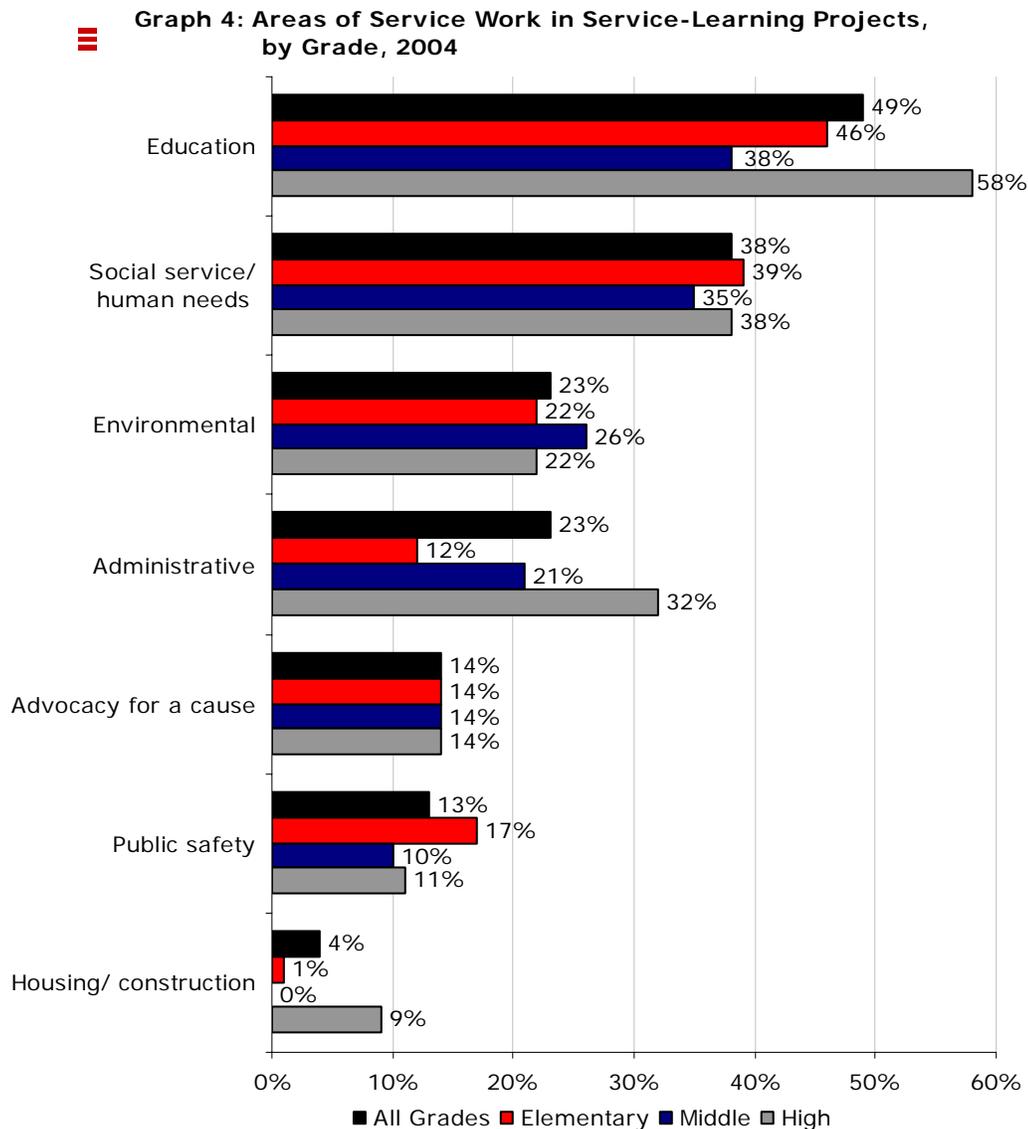
Graph 3: Method of Service-Learning in Schools, by Grade, 2004



Source: "Community Service and Service-Learning in U.S. Public Schools, 2004"

Areas of service work in service-learning projects

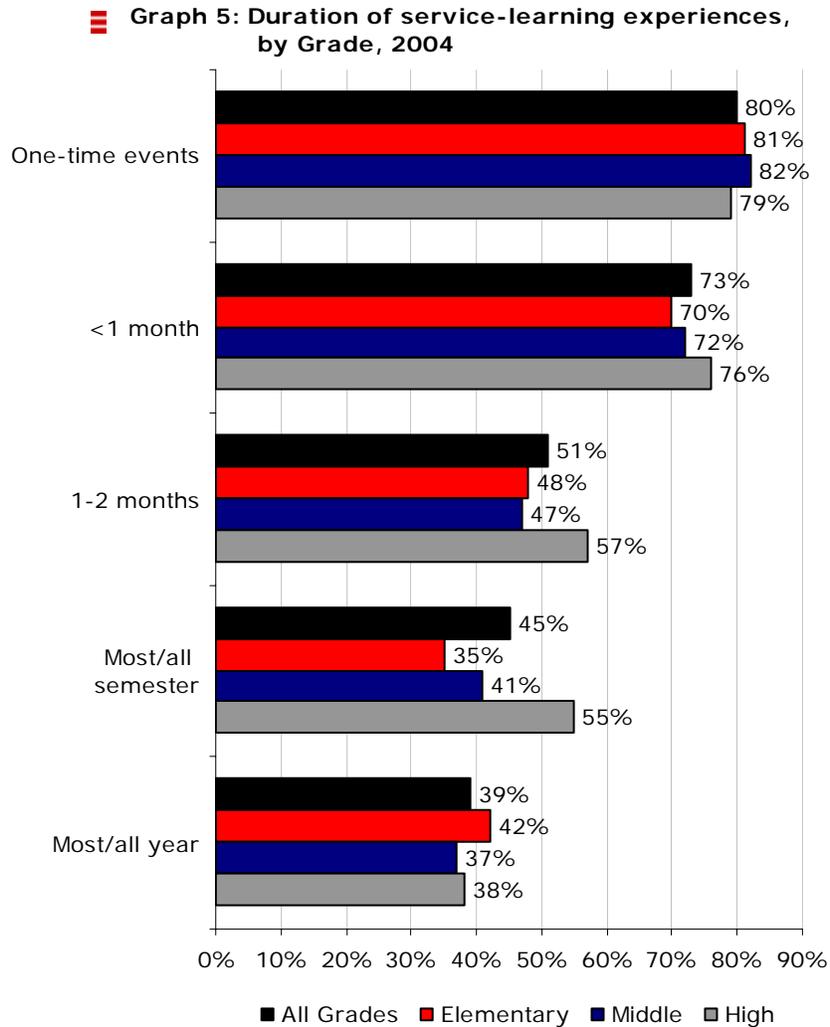
The specific type of service work on which service-learning projects focus also varies widely among schools. As shown in Graph 4, experiences in the field of education (such as tutoring or teaching) are the most common across all schools, with 49 percent of schools using service-learning reporting that education-related service is very common in their school's projects. Social service work is also common among schools at all levels. At the high school level, education, administrative work (such as office support or preparing materials), and housing or other construction work are more common than at other grade levels, whereas elementary students are more likely to do work in public safety than students at other grades.



Source: "Community Service and Service-Learning in U.S. Public Schools, 2004"

Length of service-learning projects

As Graph 5 demonstrates, participation in service-learning decreases as the length of projects increases. A full 80 percent of principals claim one-time events are very or somewhat common in their school, while semester-long projects are common in less than half and year-long projects are common at a mere 39 percent of schools.



Source: "Community Service and Service-Learning in U.S. Public Schools, 2004"

Notes

¹ I thank Mark Hugo Lopez, Emily Kirby, Carrie Donovan, and Peter Levine for comments on previous drafts of this fact sheet. All errors in fact or interpretation are my own.

² See *Community Service and Service-Learning in U.S. Public Schools, 2004: Findings from a National Survey*, by Peter C. Scales and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain for the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC), 2004. The full report is available from <http://www.nylc.org/objects/inaction/initiatives/2004G2G/2004G2GCompleteSurvey.pdf>.

³ The formal definition of service-learning commonly used in research studies today was first used by Skinner & Chapman in 1999, who defined service-learning as “curriculum-based community service done through schools that integrates classroom instruction with community service activities.”

⁴ For example, a middle school science class studying the environment might participate in a community service project that involves working together to clean up a local park. However, the same students participating in a service learning-project would not only keep the area clean, but perhaps also post signs providing information to the public and study the impact of industrial development on the area. In addition, class time would go beyond simply studying the environment and would also be dedicated to engaging students in writing about their experiences in journals and participating in discussions about the project and its effect on their lives and the local community.

⁵ Summarized from Scales and Roehlkepartain, 2004; *Research on K-12 School-Based Service-Learning: The Evidence Builds* by Shelley Billig, Phi Delta Kappan Vol 81 No 9, May 2000, p. 658-664; and *Community Service and Service-Learning in America: The State of the Art* by Ivor A. Pritchard, in Furco and Billig (eds) *Advances in Service-Learning Research: The Essence of the Pedagogy*, 2002, p. 3-21.

⁶ See *A Profile of High School Community Service Programs*, by Fred M. Newmann and Robert A. Rutter, Educational Leadership December 1985/January 1986, 64-71.

⁷ See *Service-Learning and Community Service in K-12 Public Schools*, by Rebecca Skinner and Chris Chapman, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, September 1999. The full report is available from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=1999043>.

⁸ The 2004 study reports that the most common explanation among the 70% of principals not utilizing service-learning was that service-learning is “not required by any of the standards frameworks that drive schools today.” In particular, many middle and high school principals referred to the stringent achievement levels and compliance codes that went into effect with the No Child Left Behind Act, which may account for the recent declines in participation. But as the researchers also point out, minimal declines despite an educational climate of major budget cuts, increased focus on “basic” subjects and teaching, and new standards says a lot about public school commitment to service-learning.

⁹ See *Youth Service-Learning and Community Service Among 6th- through 12th-Grade Students in the United States: 1996 and 1999*, by Brian Kleiner and Chris Chapman, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, November 1999. The full report is available from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/2000028.pdf>.

¹⁰ In the 2004 survey, respondents were instructed to categorize the school’s service projects as service-learning if they aligned with Skinner and Chapman’s 1999 definition of service-learning (see above) and if projects met the following criteria: be organized in relation to an academic course or curriculum; have clearly stated learning objectives; address real community needs in a sustained manner over a period of time; and assist students in drawing lessons from the service through regularly scheduled organized reflection or critical analysis activities, such as classroom discussion, presentations, or directed writing.