RESEARCH SUMMARY: Service-Learning and K-12 Student Development

Academic Achievement and Cognitive Learning

Participation in high quality service-learning experiences is associated with improved subject matter learning and academic performance, greater academic engagement, increased motivation for learning, improved school attendance and grades, and engagement in higher order thinking.

Improved Subject Matter Learning and Performance:

K-12 students who engage in service-learning have outperformed non service-learning students on standardized state examinations (reading and language arts) and classroom academic content learning assessments (science, mathematics, and social studies).[1]

School Success Indicators

Studies have found positive associations between K-12 students' service-learning participation and reductions in disciplinary problems, improvements in students' school attendance, improvements in students' grades and grade-point averages, and increases in student retention in school.[2]

Learning Commitment, Engagement, and Motivation:

When done well, service-learning activities can enhance students' motivation toward school and help students develop more positive attitudes toward learning. Service-learning exposes students to factors and opportunities that are known to mediate academic achievement, including opportunities for students to act autonomously and take on more complex tasks.[3]

Civic Development and Commitment to Communities

Participation in high quality service-learning can increase students' knowledge about government, commitment to communities and service, sense of civic responsibility, increased civic leadership, and acceptance of diversity and cultural differences.[4]

Personal and Social Development

Service-learning participation is consistently found to be an effective instructional strategy for developing students' self-esteem, self-efficacy, perseverance, resilience, leadership skills, and a positive transition to adulthood. Research studies also suggest that service-learning is an effective practice for enhancing students' social networks, relationships with peers and adults, and social capital.[5]

Career and Vocational Development

Several studies have found service-learning as a vehicle for students to explore career options and develop career-related skills, including teamwork, solving complex tasks, formulation of career plans, and interview skills.[6]

Character Development

When combined with character development curricula, service-learning participation has been found to enhance character traits, such as cooperation, responsibility, and integrity, especially among elementary school students.[7]

CONSIDERATIONS

- Not all service-learning experiences produce positive outcomes for participants. Positive outcomes manifest when service-learning includes particular practices, such as high integration of academic learning with service activities, meaningful service experiences, intentional reflection, community reciprocity, adequate duration, student-centered approaches, and other components associated with high quality service-learning practice.

- Within K-12 education, it is estimated that only one in eight students are exposed to this instructional practice.

- It is worth noting that within higher education, service-learning is widely considered a "high impact instructional practice" (Kuh, 2008), and in turn, more than 80% of all colleges and universities in the United States offer opportunities for students to enhance their academic and civic learning through service-learning.

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