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Developing Thoughtful and Caring Citizens Through Service-Learning

By Amy Meuers

Many people agree that the goal of education is to enable all students to achieve their potential, learn to participate in our democracy as engaged and informed citizens, and compete in an ever-changing global marketplace. As schools face an array of new and complex challenges — from meeting rigorous academic standards and meeting the needs of increasingly diverse students, to integrating new technology in the classroom and producing new measures of success in a rapidly-globalizing world — the value of a moral and ethical, engaged, and informed citizenry can sometimes be lost. The impact of such a loss can be devastating. As the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, "... education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society. The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals."

Service-learning helps teachers answer the question of "How can I teach civic responsibility, citizenship, and foster good character development while meeting content and performance standards?" The National Youth Leadership Council defines service-learning as an approach to teaching and learning in which students use academic and civic knowledge and skills to address a genuine community need. It supports students in developing civic responsibility by placing them in situations where they are asked to think critically about the world around them and then to engage as informed citizens in making meaningful change happen.

"Quality service-learning experiences can provide students with the opportunity for moral reasoning, decision-making and respect for others while taking action in their community."

For example, students at Harry Hurst Middle School are learning science standards while serving in the wetlands off the coast of Louisiana. This school-based service-learning project is now known as the LaBranche Wetland Watchers where each year, more than 1,100

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fifth through seventh grade students plan and participate in activities such as water quality monitoring, macro-invertebrate collection and identification, litter clean-ups, soil and plant identification, and tree planting which are all tied to required academic standards in each of the core subject areas. Students are actively developing relationships with each other and the larger community, learning new skills like public speaking, communications, and decision-making and according to one student, "spreading positivity to everyone".



Service-learning experiences like the one at Harry Hurst Middle School develop a student's "best self", including the four areas of character (moral, civic, performance, and intellectual). Quality service-learning experiences can provide students with the opportunity for moral reasoning, decision-making, and respect for others while taking action in their community. Students at Harry Hurst investigated environmental impacts caused by both climate change and local oil companies. They discussed the positive economic impact local oil companies provide to the community while grappling with the negative impacts they identified in the wetlands. Students applied their learning and took informed action as engaged citizens by reclaiming the wetlands. They reflected throughout the experience to deepen their learning and gain a better understanding of their personal connection to the issue and its larger social impact. Students continue to demonstrate both successes and lessons learned by sharing their knowledge with others and expanding the scope of the project. Through this service-learning experience, students engaged in moral and ethical reasoning, were civically engaged, and deepened their understanding of the core subject matter.

In service-learning instruction, students are resources and become active in the learning process, not passive recipients of information. The classroom becomes a place where they contribute to the world while developing new knowledge and skills. They start to see themselves as someone who can give, lead, and help others no matter their background or their abilities. Their learning isn't confined to the classroom, but, instead, extends into the community. Students learn they have something they can contribute. And, according to Harry Hurst science teacher Barry Guillot, "It's something they are going to remember forever because it's real...they are using it."

Amy Meuers is the executive leader of the National Youth Leadership Council, an international nonprofit organization that is committed to ensuring that all young people become civically informed and engaged global citizens. She is a social entrepreneur with more than 19 years of experience in the fields of service-learning and youth development and is the host of the podcast The Power of Young People to Change the World.

Youth Reflection on Service-Learning

By Grace Chenxin Liu

My service-learning experience has been centered around advocacy and research into gender equality and sustainable development. Through the "Sharing to Empower" initiative, I've engaged students, educators, policymakers, and organizations both locally and globally by creating meetings and events to educate on these issues. These experiences have taught me that advocacy and research shouldn't be in a distant, untouchable ivy tower, rather, they should solve real-world

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problems and benefit disadvantaged communities to create societal impacts. I have learned that every individual has the power to make a difference and teamwork is the fuel that enables us to achieve amazing results.

Grace Chenxin Liu is a National Youth Leadership Council Youth Advisory Council Member and Founder, Sharing to Empower

Raising Good Kids: National survey of parents reveals their commitment and struggles to nurture character

Shared with permission from Character.org, this article is taken, in part, from character.org/parent-survey/ and https://issuu.com/character.org/docs/final_survey_report_-1.18.2023.

Parents today face a multitude of challenges that previous generations never encountered. From social media and smart devices to the pandemic's impact on learning and social skills, parents are anxious and concerned about their children navigating a world that is increasingly connected and isolated at the same time.

Character.org wanted to understand how parents feel about raising good kids in the Digital Age, particularly at a time when our nation is experiencing growing division on topics that range from education and health care to respect and civility. So they partnered with Ipsos to survey a nationally representative sample of parents with children between the ages of 6-18 years old, including parents who are native Spanish speakers. The online survey was conducted in the fall of 2022.

The report shared five key findings from the survey: 1. Parents are committed but struggle to nurture character; 2. Parents agree on the character strengths they want their kids to care about; 3. A divided, digital world creates challenges for parents and children; 4. It is hard to model and emphasize character; and 5. Parents look to schools and their community for help.

- *89% of parents agree that teachers have a positive impact on their children's character*
- *85% of parents agree that being a good person helps one succeed in life*



The findings from the survey suggest five essential steps for parents to take to ensure that their child grows into a thriving person of character:

1. **Commitment:** Commitment to model and reinforce to their children the core values and character strengths that mean the most to them.
2. **Consistency:** Consistency in setting clear expectations, explaining why these are important, and in reinforcing the expectations.
3. **Conversations:** Conversations about character with their children, especially as they get older.
4. **Community:** Every adult involved in a child's development are critical to modeling and upholding the core values parents care most about.
5. **Celebration:** Celebrate the moments when their children consistently practice a core value so the children recognize that they can shape and define their own character.

Read the full report at <https://character.org/parent-survey/#open>