



Youth Service and Civic Engagement: Involving Young People as Civic Leaders through Community-Based Learning

Introduction

The 2008 election, more than any other election since the 1960's, has activated young people to get involved, make a difference, and vote. Youth want to participate in civic action, but few communities in the nation are encouraging and equipping them to do so in an ongoing and systematic way.

This is where youth civic engagement comes in: an approach that involves young people in community based learning through building intentional opportunities and skills that apply democracy in action.

Across the state and throughout the Sacramento region, youth civic engagement is taking place in schools and community groups through service-based projects. In 1996, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction established that 25 percent of California's 994 school districts should offer students at least one community service or service-learning opportunity at each grade span. Today, this service-learning standard has increased to include 50 percent of all California school districts. In addition, there is growing community support and efforts from the government and community based sectors to engage youth in civic activism and service.

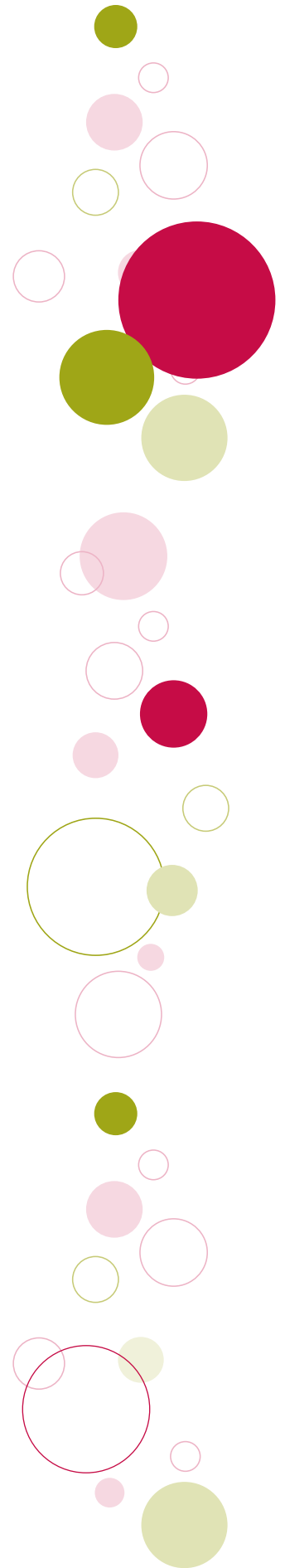
What Are the Benefits of Youth Civic Engagement through Service-Learning?

Student Benefits

- Application of academic studies
- Development of interpersonal and problem solving skills useful in life and work
- Positive civic outcomes later in adulthood
- Increased academic achievement
- Better understanding community resources and how to connect to them
- Developing a sense of purpose and efficacy
- Understanding how to be an advocate for self and others
- Understanding how government works

School Benefits

- School becomes more relevant
- Lower drop-out rates
- Improved relationships between students and staff



- Higher attendance rates
- Higher graduation rates
- New partnerships and resources to support learning

Community Benefits

- Better community perception of young people
- Increased Voting Rates
- Developing long-term volunteers to support communities
- Better, healthier and safer Communities result
- Youth are more vested in making their communities better
- Community policies and adult practices are better informed by youth input and voice
- Growing base of leaders

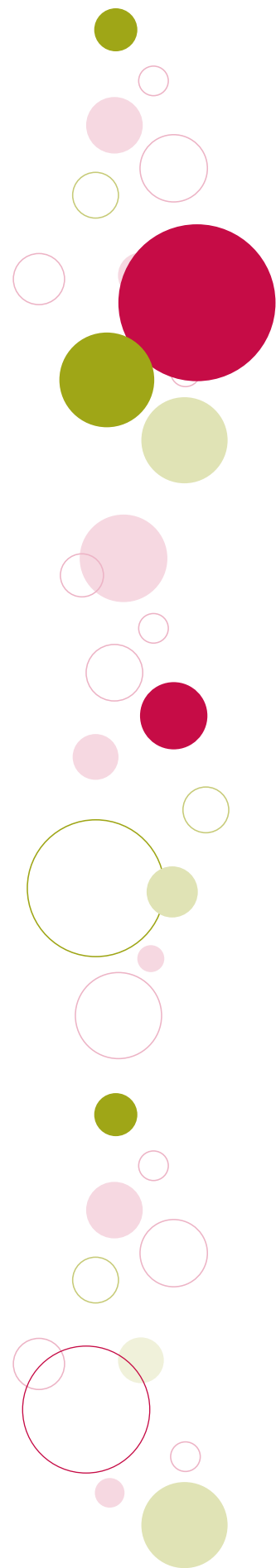
The Shift Towards High Quality Service-Learning

One particular civic engagement strategy for youth is service-learning, a philosophy that integrates broad academic learning goals with experiential community-based service efforts to promote community change. Service-learning efforts vary from igniting initial civic participation through short-term projects—such as organizing a graffiti paint-out—to higher levels of engagement where youth serve as philanthropists funding youth community improvement projects (the Grants Advisory Board for Youth), to youth being in positions as joint decision makers with adults on civic matters such as serving on city commissions or task forces focused on certain policy or community improvement issues (The County Children’s Coalition), to youth leading civic groups (City Youth Commission) to youth changing policies through community organizing (Area Congregations Together Youth Organizing efforts) High quality service-learning refocuses attention on young people as resources for civic action as opposed to young people as recipients of community services. High quality service learning moves youth from doing discrete service activities to improve their community to engaging and effecting policies and resource allocation that impact the community’s health and well being.

Figure 1 illustrates this shift in how young people can serve their community through high quality service-learning:

From	To
Consumers of public services	Regulators of public services
Citizens as customers	Citizens as shareholders or owners
Ignore community issues	Framers of community issues
Political apathy	Political action
Subjects of the law	Owners of the law
Government for the people	Government with the people
Not voting	Voting
Voting	Running for public office
No authority/responsibility for civic system	Active authority/responsibility for civic system

Figure 1: The Shift towards High Quality Service-Learning. CalServe, “Need to Refocus Attention on How Youth Serve Their Community,” 2008.



What high quality service-learning looks like:

In 2005 in Galt, California, young people expressed a need to their local councilwoman for youth's interests to be heard. As Councilwoman Barbara Payne explains, instead of making Galt's young people choose from pre-existing activities designed by adults, or letting young people "get more and more involved in gangs," she opted for a non-traditional, youth development based approach.

The Galt City Council Youth Committee became a means for young people to take an active role in shaping their community's opportunities for youth involvement. Since the youth committee's inception in 2005, they have designed and hosted events such as the Galt Festival, skateboard exhibition, the Tour de Galt, the Grand Opening of Monterey Park, Diversity Day, and Napoleon Dynamite Day. These youth are now being engaged in a youth master plan that the community is considering developing.

The Galt City Council Youth Committee is one example of a high quality youth service experience that incorporates youth voice and governance opportunities in influencing community services.

Standards of High Quality Service-Learning

As identified by National Youth Leadership Council (2008) and Youth Service California (2006). For more details visit www.ydnetwork.org to download the full report.

- Meaningful and Relevant Service Opportunities
- Link Service to Instructional Curriculum
- Direct Service and Civic Activism
- Youth Voice
- Sufficient Duration and Intensity
- Collaborative Partnerships
- Reflection on Relationship to Society
- On-Going Evaluation

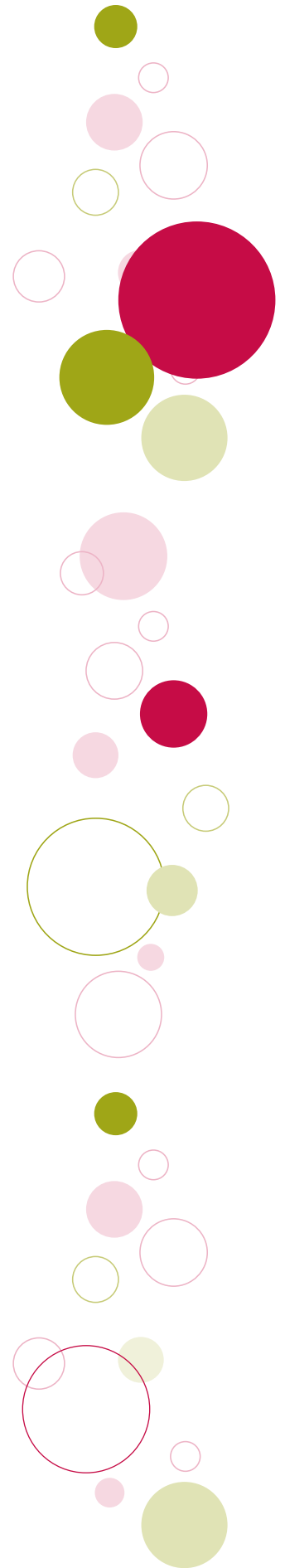
Sacramento Regional Approaches to Service-Learning and Community Service

Throughout the greater Sacramento region, innovative examples of service-learning and community service projects are being implemented across a multitude of sectors:

School Districts:

Elk Grove Unified partners with local community-based organizations which fund 62 percent of the program.

Galt Joint Union School District established a district-wide approach to service-learning by creating a district Service-Learning Coordinator position.



Community Based Programs:

The GEO Garden Project at Grant High School in Sacramento engages students in maintaining a community garden on the school site. The students then use the vegetables to make salsa, which they then bottle, advertise, and sell at local farmer's markets. The program teaches students about environmental sustainability, food systems, marketing and communication, financial literacy, and leadership skills to maintain a student-run business.

Sierra Health Foundation REACH program effort funds nine community coalitions that are engaging youth and adults in civic activism to make their communities more youth friendly places by changing policies to support youth development (www.reachyouthprogram.org)

Grants Advisory Board for Youth is a youth run and operated funding board that provides mini grants to youth for youth led community improvement projects. (www.gabby.sacregcf.org)

Volunteer Support and Recruitment Programs:

Hands-On Sacramento and the Volunteer Center of Sacramento offer a vast array of volunteer opportunities, including user-friendly web sites for students, parents, and schools interested in signing up for pre-arranged volunteer projects. Visit them online at <http://www.handsonsacto.org/> and <http://www.volunteersac.org/>.

City and County Programs:

Placer County Peer Court takes on juvenile court cases referred by juvenile probation department, school site police officers, the juvenile court, or local police agencies. Juveniles appear before the peer court, where young people assume the roles of jurors, teen attorney, clerk, and bailiff. (Adult mentor attorneys are also present, as well as an adult judge who presides.)

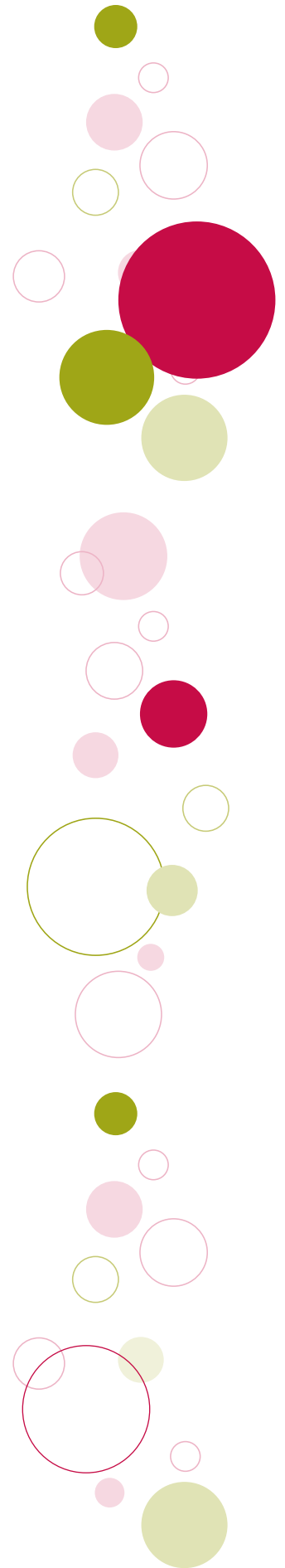
City of Sacramento has a youth commission that advises the city council on youth matters.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The following recommendations for policy and practice convey strategies for promoting service opportunities for young people in the greater Sacramento region. These recommendations reflect the innovative strategies currently being implemented throughout the various sectors across the region, as well as suggestions for further actions to be taken.

Recommendations to Districts and School Boards

- Adopt a service-learning policy as a way to support multiple, relevant pathways to learning. Fund your district's service-learning program by applying for Cal Serve Grants. For information, contact Mike Brugh, CalServe Director, 916-319-0543, or mbrugh@cde.ca.gov.
- Work in partnership with community agencies to link the classroom to the community. Direct teachers and students to the Volunteer Center, Hands-On Sacramento, or the Youth Development Network to help identify service partnerships.
- Teach students how to find service opportunities in their community and what it means to do service.



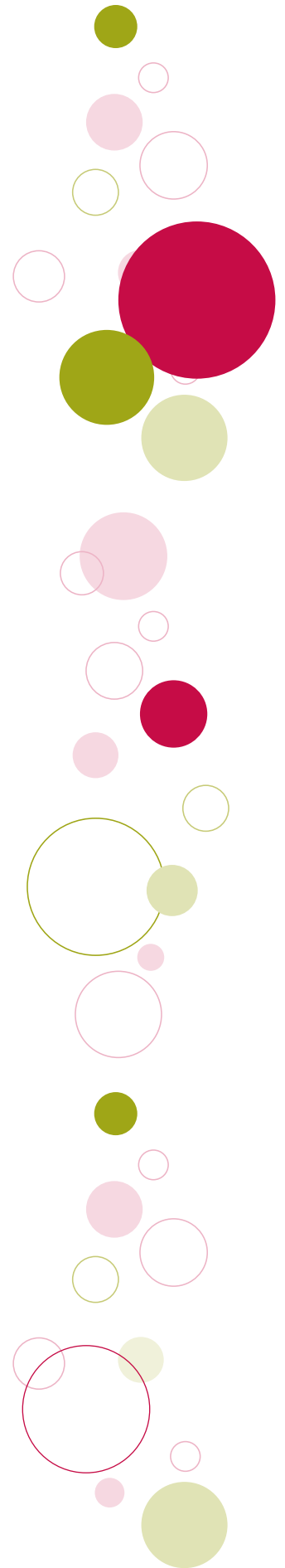
- Establish a Service-Learning Coordinator for your district to assist in program promotion throughout the community, and connect teachers and students to potential service opportunities.
- Require service learning as part of senior projects.
- Support the Regional Compact for Children and Youth and advocate for more youth leadership and service opportunities for youth.

Recommendations to Community-Based Organizations

- Offer volunteer or service-learning opportunities as part of your agency's programming. Register with the Sacramento Volunteer Center or Hands Together Sacramento to post your service opportunities. Train your staff on how to engage youth in meaningful service.
- Partner with local districts and schools to support student projects and classroom learning by using your agency's services, knowledge and expertise to support student learning.
- Invite students to help your organization work on a research or service delivery project (i.e.: pulling water reeds in the river, helping paint over graffiti, researching a question that will inform your service delivery).
- Support the Regional Compact for Children and Youth and advocate for more youth leadership and service opportunities for youth.

Recommendations to Government Agencies and Policy Bodies

- Create youth volunteer, leadership and service learning opportunities throughout municipal government, and document how schools and youth can access these opportunities. Train staff on how to develop and offer youth friendly volunteer and civic opportunities.
- Partner with local schools, districts, and community-based organizations to implement service-learning. Have staff make classroom presentations on joint government and classroom service learning opportunities.
- Co-host with the Youth Development Network a city/county wide volunteer fair for students and teachers on how to access city and CBO volunteer and service-learning opportunities.
- Support policies and efforts that increase youth voice in civic decision-making and governance.
 - Create youth commissions that have resources, training and clout to advise on policy matters.
 - Put youth on other commissions and boards to have equal voice with adults on community matters.
 - Create neighborhood based civic action teams.
 - Hold youth led town halls that can spur ideas for civic engagement and policy change.
- Ensure training infrastructure exists in the community to train adults on how to engage youth in service and leadership and to train youth on how to be leaders and volunteers.



- Elected leaders promote service learning and youth leadership to the community. Government supports efforts to organize regional service days linked to national service days.
- Involve your local Chambers of Commerce to get businesses to adopt a school that promotes youth service in your city.
- Support the Regional Compact for Children and Youth and advocate for more youth leadership and service opportunities for youth.

Additional Information on Service-Learning:

- Corporation for National and Community Service, Learn and Serve America, www.learnandserve.org
- Youth Service California, www.yscal.org
- Region 3 Service-Learning Leads: Bina Lefkowitz at bina@ydnetwork.org, or 916-213-9679 and Debra Bruns at (530)668-3781 or Deborah.Bruns@ycoe.org.

Committed to Youth in Sacramento and Beyond:

The Youth Development Network exists to promote strength-based principles that support the positive development of youth. By supporting families, communities, schools and organizations, YDN works to give adults and youth the necessary skills to become healthy, thriving adults. Civic engagement is only one component to youth's long term success. To learn more about youth development principles and how to put them into practice, contact Bina Lefkowitz at bina@ydnetwork.org, or 916-213-9679.



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