

## **Service-Learning in K-12 Education**

by Marybeth Neal

*Originally published in The Generator, April 2003, An Introduction to the State Farm State of Service-Learning Project (Growing to Greatness).*

### **Background**

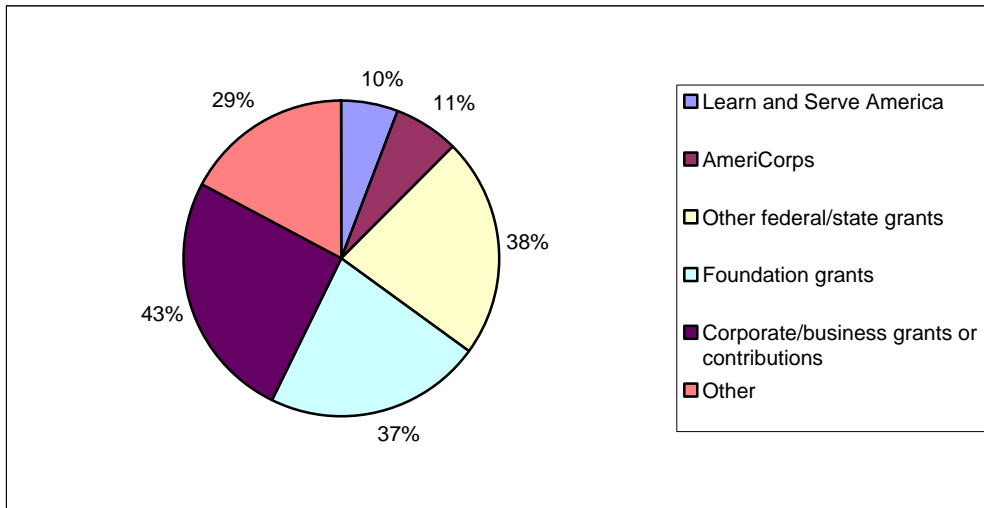
Whether the origins of service-learning lie with the founding of the United States, Jefferson and DeToqueville, John Dewey's 1916 philosophy of experiential education, or in the tides of the turbulent 1960s, service-learning is making its mark on American culture and society.

The practice of service-learning, while still not exactly a household word, has grown exponentially since 1984, when the first nationwide study of service-learning indicated that the percentage of high schools offering service programs was 27 percent and the percentage of high schools offering service-learning (defined as service tied to the academic curricula) was 9 percent.<sup>1</sup>

Fifteen years later, these numbers have skyrocketed. In 1999, the year of our last national survey, the number of public high schools offering service was 83 percent and 49 percent of all public high schools offered service-learning. Spanning the entire K-12 spectrum, students in 64 percent of all public schools participated in community service activities recognized and/or arranged by the school. Students in 32 percent of all public schools participated in service-learning as part of their curriculum.<sup>2</sup> The 1999 National Center For Education Statistics Fast Response Survey System (NCES FRSS) estimated that this means that nearly 12,605,740 students participated in service-learning, a number that has probably increased since 1999.<sup>3</sup>

A further indication of the growth, possibly reflecting the institutionalization within school budgets and policies, are the 84 percent of public schools who reported that they did not receive outside financial help for their programs. Of those receiving financial help, most schools received funding from corporations in the form of grants and contributions (43 percent). Funding from Learn and Serve America was the least mentioned (10 percent of schools).<sup>4</sup>

**Of public schools receiving any special grants or other special funding to support service-learning and/or community service activities, percent receiving various sources of funding: Academic year 1998-1999.**



*NOTE: Data presented in this figure are based upon the number of schools that reported receiving any special grants or other special funding to support service-learning or community service activities – 16 percent of public schools. Percentage of schools reporting that they received special grants or special funding do not sum to 100 because many schools reported receiving special grants or special funding from more than one source. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System (FRSS), “National Student Service-Learning and Community Service Survey,” FRSS 71, 1999.*

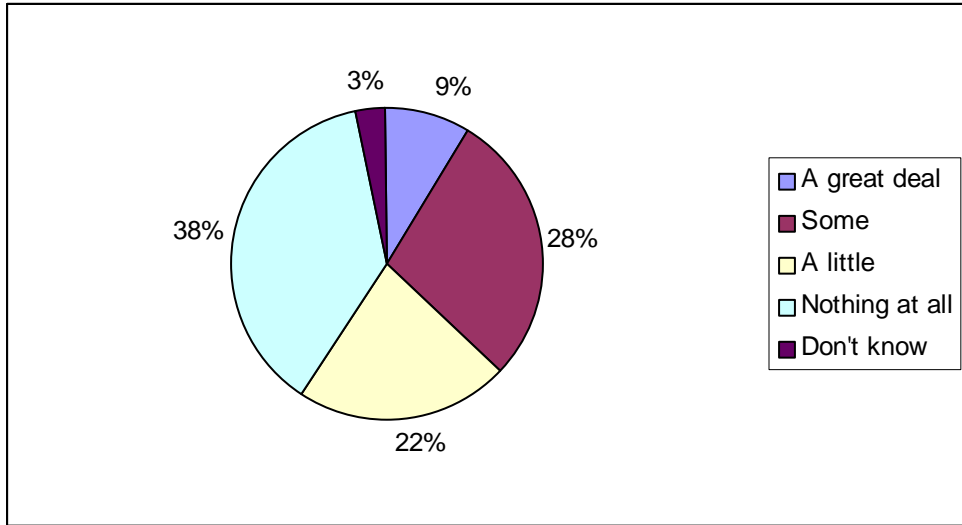
**Public Support for Service-Learning and the Need for Increased Understanding of Service-Learning and Its Impacts**

A great deal of public support exists for service-learning, but only after it is explained. The 1999 Roper Starch public opinion survey indicated that nine in 10 Americans support service-learning being included in their local school, after being presented with the following definition of service-learning:

[S]tudents, as part of their education, strengthen academic skills and build civic responsibility by using what they are learning in school for community projects.<sup>5</sup>

### Recognition of the Term Service-Learning

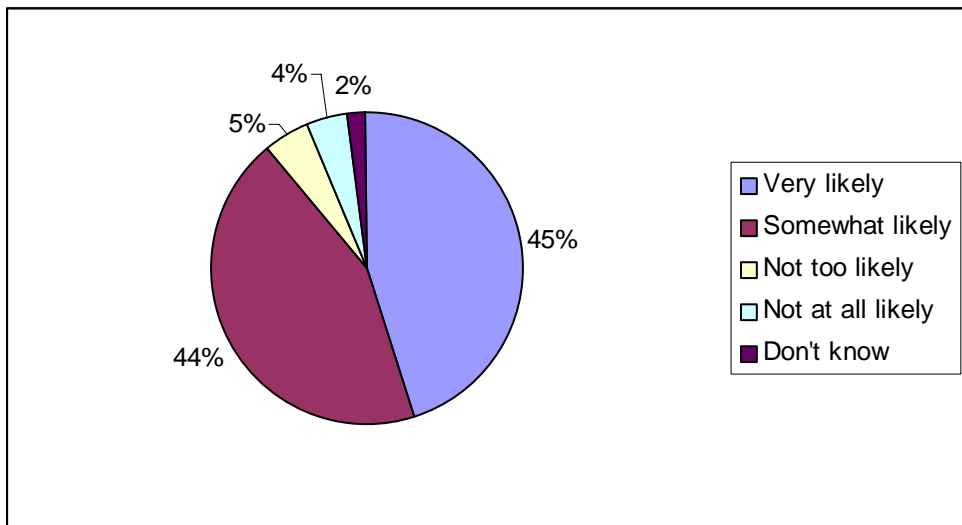
*How much have you heard or read about public school having students in kindergarten through 12th grade get involved in “service-learning” as part of their education? Would you say you have heard or read a great deal, some, a little, or nothing at all about “service-learning”?*



*Public Attitudes Toward Education and Service-Learning. Academy for Educational Development and the Learning In Deed Initiative. November 2000.*

### Gauging Support for Service-Learning

*In service-learning, students, as part of their education, strengthen their academic skills by using what they are learning in school community projects. With this in mind, how likely would you be to support service-learning in your local public schools? Would you be very likely to support it, somewhat likely, not too likely, or not at all likely to support it?*



*Public Attitudes Toward Education and Service-Learning. Academy for Educational Development and the Learning In Deed Initiative. November 2000.*

In late 1998 and 1999, Learning In Deed commissioned a “snapshot” of public perceptions about service-learning using various types of opinion research, including focus groups and a media scan. While it should not be considered a comprehensive study on public opinion, it does give an idea of the range of perceptions about service-learning that exist. The media scan reviewed articles written in 1997 and 1998 and determined that 41 percent had accurate definitions of service-learning, while 46 percent had no definitions and 11 percent had inaccurate definitions. Over 50 percent of articles described service-learning in a favorable way, while 4 percent of articles were negative. Of those articles that were negative towards service-learning, most of these confused service-learning with mandated service.<sup>6</sup>

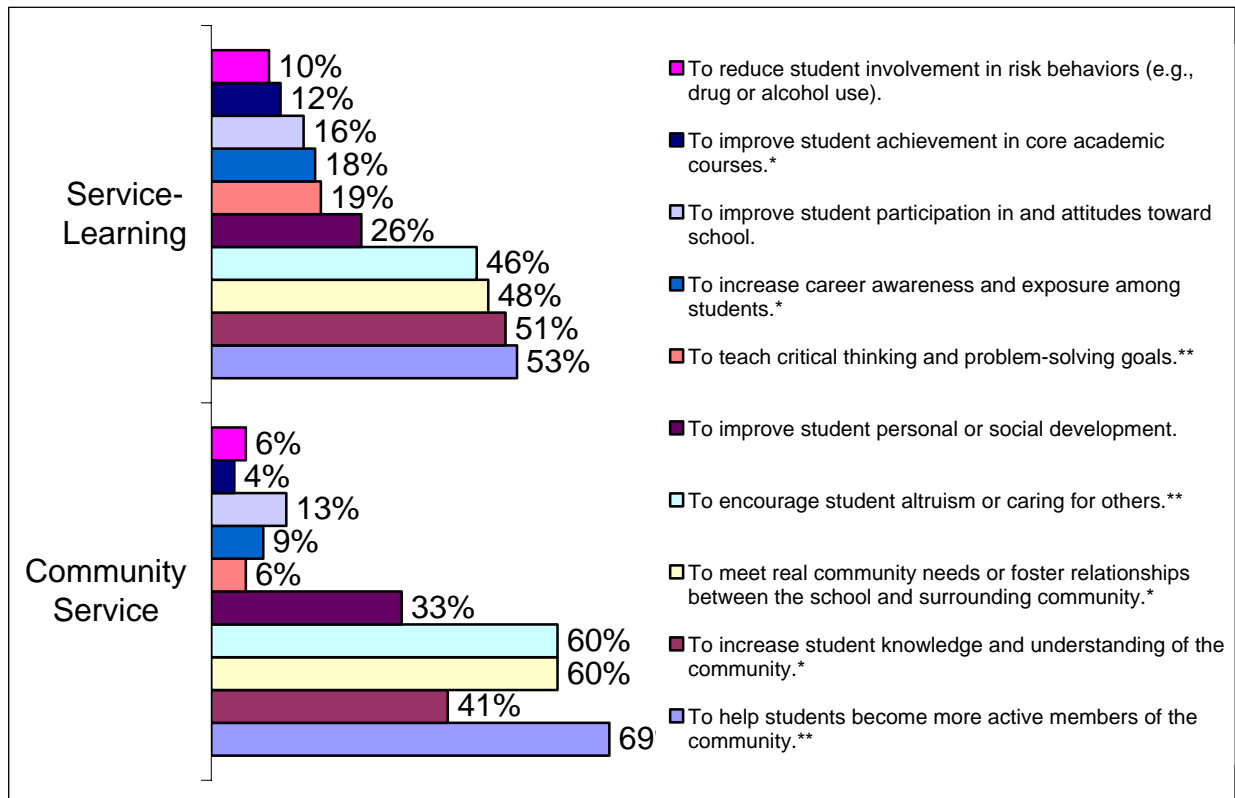
Perhaps the most widely used definition of service-learning is provided in the National and Community Service Act. It defines service-learning as an educational experience with the following attributes:

- Students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs and that are coordinated in collaboration with school and community;
- It is integrated into the students’ academic curriculum or provides structured time for a student to think, talk, or write about what the student did and saw during the actual service activity;
- It provides students with opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities; and
- It enhances what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community and helps to foster the development of a sense of caring for others.

### **Service-Learning and Community Service**

A common misunderstanding is the distinction between community service and service-learning. One way to distinguish between community service, internships, and service-learning is by examining our assumptions as to who the primary “beneficiary” is supposed to be. In community-service, the recipients of the service are the beneficiaries. In internships, such as student teaching, the primary beneficiaries are the students. In service-learning, both service recipients and those engaged in service are co-beneficiaries. In service-learning, service recipients receive meaningful service and the student “servers” receive an enhanced education because they get to apply skills learned in the classroom in real-life situations.

## Reasons for Encouraging Service-Learning or Community Service



U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System (FRSS), "National Student Service-Learning and Community Service Survey," FRSS 71, 1999.

\*  $p < .05$  for service-learning administrators' vs. community service administrators' choice of the given reason.

\*\*  $p < .05$  for service-learning administrators' vs. community service administrators' choice of the reason as one of their top three reasons.

### Service-Learning as a Philosophy, Community Development Model and Teaching Strategy

Perhaps one of the reasons that may account for both confusion over its definition, as well as the enthusiasm of its advocates, is that service-learning is not just a teaching method. Jim Kielsmeier describes service-learning as a philosophy, a community development model, and a teaching and learning method:<sup>7</sup>

- As a *philosophy*, service-learning embraces young people as a community resource and asset. It views all people in a democratic society as citizens with the capacity to contribute – no matter their age.
- As a *community development model*, service-learning takes on real issues such as pollution control, hunger and homelessness, and diversity. Communities change for the better when service and learning are joined.
- As a *teaching and learning method*, service-learning is a form of active learning that values critical thinking and problem solving. Research shows that when service-learning is effectively implemented students gain in measures of academic achievement, citizenship, and character.

### **Origins of Service-Learning**

The interest in service-learning as an educational strategy for K-12 students is often traced to the Progressive Education movement of the early twentieth century. John Dewey's emphasis on the "continuity of experience" supported the idea that learning in the formal classroom should be enhanced by applying that knowledge in real-life contexts.<sup>8</sup> William Kirkpatrick, a follower of Dewey, developed the "Project Method" which emphasized that students should apply classroom knowledge to the "real world" in the context of service to meet real community needs.<sup>9</sup>

Early interest in experiential education was perhaps more philosophical than focused on implementation, but by the 1960s and 1970s, there was increasing concern over the purpose and meaning of schooling. At the same time, John F. Kennedy's famous dictum "ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country" was put into practice by increasing numbers of young people who worked to address problems of illiteracy and poverty by joining the newly created VISTA, Peace Corps, and other organizations that placed young people in service settings. Entities such as the National Association of Secondary School Principals and at least three national advisory committees, including the National Panel on Youth of the President's Advisory Committee, the National Commission on Resources for Youth, and the National Panel on High School and Adolescent Education, criticized schooling for isolating students from real life, suggesting that this isolation results in youth who are alienated from society.<sup>10,11,12, 13</sup> Schools, according to this view, have a responsibility to integrate students into adult roles. Community service came to be viewed as a teaching strategy that increased student understanding of the relevance of schooling and provided opportunities for young people to transition into adult roles and responsibilities.

### **Service-Learning and Its Relationship to Educational Reform**

In the 1980s, concerns about the effectiveness of schooling increased, as evidenced by the publication of *A Nation At Risk* and focused public attention on the difficulties schools seemed to have in providing a solid education for many students.<sup>14</sup> For some, this led to what has become known as the "back to basics" movement with an emphasis on basic subjects where achievement is measured by test scores. At the same time, however, others in the education field, such as Ernest Boyer, continued to see the problem as a disconnect between the learning that takes place in the formal classroom, the lives of young people, and the wider society. In his book *High School*, Boyer asserted that the way to get students to become responsibly engaged, both in their studies as well as in civic life, was through community service.<sup>15</sup> The division between those advocating experientially-based education and those taking a more "back to basics" approach with an emphasis on a standards-based curriculum was never total. Indeed, as service-learning emerged as a field of inquiry, studies were conducted that demonstrated the connection between service-learning and increased academic success.

Studies abound that show service-learning participation is associated with higher scores on state basic skills tests and higher grades.<sup>16, 17, 18, 19</sup> To this end, many states have used their Learn and Serve funds to develop curriculum materials that use service-learning as a



- The impact on academic learning (including increased engagement with school and increased attendance, as well as improved grades and test scores).
- The impact on career exploration and aspirations.
- The impact on schools (including greater mutual respect between teachers and students, and improved overall school climate).
- Impact on communities (including increased positive attitudes between students and community members, where the community members view youth as valued resources to the community).

In a preliminary draft of Billig’s review, she notes that, at the time that she collected the research for the research brief, no research had been identified with negative impacts, and only a few studies showed no impact or no sustained impact over time.<sup>20</sup> Here is a sampling of studies that show improvement in academic achievement and attitude towards schooling, followed by studies that show improvement in civic engagement through service-learning:

*Increased Grade Point Average and Test Scores*

In addition to those studies previously mentioned and eight more listed on the Learning In Deed website, Joe Follman of Florida found that 83 percent of schools with service-learning programs reported that grade point averages of participating service-learning students improved 76 percent of the time.<sup>21</sup>

*Increased Engagement in School and Motivation to Learn*

Students who engaged in service-learning came to class on time more often, completed more classroom tasks, and took the initiative to ask questions more often.<sup>22</sup> Weiler et al found that students in over half of the high quality service-learning schools studied showed moderate to strong positive gains on student achievement tests in language arts and/or reading, engagement in school, sense of educational accomplishment, and homework completion.<sup>23</sup> Stephens found that elementary and middle school students who participated in service-learning had improved problem-solving skills and increased interest in academics.<sup>24</sup>

*Civic Engagement*

Of particular interest to the State of Service-Learning Project is the research that goes beyond the context of the school, school engagement, and a primary focus on the student, to explore the impact of service-learning activities on youth-community engagement. Recently there has been a growing interest to research “civic engagement” and service-learning. This is not a new interest or concern, as the literature from the 1970s mentioned previously, where the lack of student engagement with society and the need to help youth transition into adulthood was a concern of several national panels. However, since the 1970s, the field of service-learning has matured considerably and the potential for service-learning to help make positive community impacts, promote democracy, and encourage positive youth-community inter-relationships has become more firmly established.

A sampling of recent studies on civic engagement includes Morgan and Streb's study involving pre- and post-test surveys of more than 200 high school students who participated in service-learning projects in ten different Indiana schools. A key finding was the importance of "youth voice." They found that the more responsibility and decision-making power that was given to students for the design and implementation of service-learning projects, the greater the likelihood that students would be politically engaged, be socially active, and respect people different from themselves.<sup>25</sup> In the Learning In Deed Issue Paper *Integrating Youth Voice in Service-Learning*, Fredericks, et al., echo the findings of Morgan and Streb, identifying youth voice as a key element in service-learning, without which the potential of service-learning is thwarted. Citing as an example a national study of 1,000 randomly selected young people who had participated in either service or service-learning programs that showed that their commitment to service and community building had declined over time, the authors write:

When youth voice is missing from a service program, young people may feel more discouraged and alienated. To them, service becomes just one more place in their lives where their ideas are not respected and their contributions are unimportant.<sup>26</sup>

### *Social Capital*

Related to the idea of civic engagement is "social capital," as presented by Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone*.<sup>27</sup> The degree to which communities operate as networks of people who trust, respect, and support each other is the degree to which the social capital of the community can be said to be strongest. Social capital is enhanced by the networks of support created through service-learning activities. Several studies show that community members who partner with schools in service-learning projects improve their attitude towards young people, viewing them as valued resources and positive contributors to the community.<sup>28, 29, 30, 31, 32</sup>

### **Web-Based Resources for Service-Learning in K-12**

National Youth Leadership Council  
[www.nylc.org](http://www.nylc.org)

National Service-Learning Clearinghouse  
[www.service-learning.org](http://www.service-learning.org)

National Service-Learning Partnership  
[www.service-learningpartnership.org](http://www.service-learningpartnership.org)

National Service-Learning Commission  
[www.service-learningcommission.org](http://www.service-learningcommission.org)

Youth Service America  
[www.ysa.org](http://www.ysa.org)

## References

- <sup>1</sup>Newman, F., & Rutter, R. (1985). A Profile of High School Community Service Programs. *Educational Leadership*, 43 (4), 1985. pp. 65-71.
- <sup>2</sup>NCES. *Statistics in Brief*. September 1999:1.
- <sup>3</sup>NCES. *Statistics in Brief*. September 1999:1.
- <sup>4</sup>NCES. *Statistics in Brief*. September 1999:11.
- <sup>5</sup>Roper Starch Worldwide. Online. [www.learningindeed.org](http://www.learningindeed.org), 1999.
- <sup>6</sup>*Perceptions*. Online. [www.learningindeed.org](http://www.learningindeed.org) 1999. pp. 3-4.
- <sup>7</sup>Kielsmeier, J.K. National Youth Leadership Council, 2000.
- <sup>8</sup>Dewey, John. *Experience and Education*. New York: Collier Books, 1938; *Democracy and Education*. New York: Free Press, 1916.
- <sup>9</sup>Kirkpatrick, William H. 1918. *The Project Method*. Teachers College Record, 1918.
- <sup>10</sup>National Committee on Secondary Education. *American Youth in the Mid-Seventies*. Reston, Va.: National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1972.
- <sup>11</sup>Coleman, James S. *Youth: Transition to Adulthood*. Report of the Panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- <sup>12</sup>National Commission on Resources for Youth. *New Roles for Youth: In the School and the Community*. New York: Citation Press, 1974.
- <sup>13</sup>Martin, John Henry. *The Education of Adolescents*. Washington: National Panel on High School and Adolescent Education, 1976.
- <sup>14</sup>National Commission of Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. Washington: GPO, 1983.
- <sup>15</sup>Boyer, Ernest L. *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America*. New York: Harper & Row, 1983.
- <sup>16</sup>Anderson, V.; Kinsley, C.; Negroni, P.; & Price, C. Community Service-Learning and School Improvement in Springfield, Massachusetts. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 72, June 1991. pp. 761-764.
- <sup>17</sup>Shumer, R. Community-Based Learning: Humanizing Education. *Journal of Adolescence*, 17(4), 1994. pp. 357-367.
- <sup>18</sup>Shaffer, B. *Service-Learning: An Academic Methodology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Department of Education, 1993.
- <sup>19</sup>Dean, L., & Murdock, S. The Effect of Voluntary Service on Adolescent Attitudes Toward Learning. *Journal of Volunteer Administration*, Summer 1992. pp. 5-10.
- <sup>20</sup>Billig, Shelley H. Research on School-Based Service-Learning: The Evidence Builds. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 81: 9, May 2000. pp. 658-664
- <sup>21</sup>Follman, J. *Florida Learn and Serve: 1996-97 Outcomes and Correlations with 1994-95 and 1995-96*. Tallahassee: Florida State University, Center for Civic Education and Service, August 1998.
- <sup>22</sup>Loesch-Griffin, D.; Petrides, L.A.; & Pratt, C. *A Comprehensive Study of Project YES-Rethinking Classrooms and Community: Service-Learning as Educational Reform*. San Francisco: East Bay Conservation Corps, 1995.
- <sup>23</sup>Weiler, D.; LaGoy, A.; Crane, E.; & Rovner, A. *An Evaluation of K-12 Service-Learning in California: Phase II Final Report*. Emeryville, CA: RPP International with the Search Institute, 1998.

- <sup>24</sup> Stephens, L. *The Complete Guide to Learning Through Community Service, Grades K-9*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1995.
- <sup>25</sup> Morgan, W., & Streb, M. Building citizenship: How student voice in service-learning develops civic values. *Social Science Quarterly*, 82 (1), March 2001. pp. 155-169.
- <sup>26</sup> Fredericks, L.; Kaplan, E; & Zeisler, J. *Integrating Youth Voice in Service-Learning*. Education Commission of the States, Denver, Colorado, 2001.
- <sup>27</sup> Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse of Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster Trade, 2000.
- <sup>28</sup> Billig, S. & Conrad, J. *An Evaluation of the New Hampshire Service-Learning and Educational Reform Project*. Denver: RMC Research, 1997.
- <sup>29</sup> Weiler, D.; LaGoy, A.; Crane, E.; & Rovner, A. *An Evaluation of K-12 Service-Learning in California: Phase II Final Report*. Emeryville, CA: RPP International with the Search Institute, 1998.
- <sup>30</sup> Melchior, A. *Summary Report: National Evaluation of Learn and Serve America*. Waltham, MA: Center for Human Resources, Brandeis University, 1999.
- <sup>31</sup> Kingsland, S. F.; Richards, M.; & Coleman, L. *A Status Report for KIDSNET, Year One, 1994-1995*. Portland, ME: University of Southern Maine, 1995.
- <sup>32</sup> Kinsley, C. Service-Learning: A Process to Connect Learning and Living. In *Service-Learning: Leaving Footprints on the Planet*. National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin, 1-7, October 1997.