

## The Case for Service-Learning in After School Programs

Two of the most significant challenges public schools face today is an escalating dropout rate and a wide achievement gap. According to current research, nearly 1 out of 3 public high school students will not graduate. For Latinos and African Americans, the rate is closer to 50%. A look at California's Academic Performance Index (API), which measures the academic performance and growth of schools on a scale from 200 to 1000, reveals an alarming 170 point gap between California's African American and White high school students, a 147 point gap between Hispanic and Caucasian high school students, and a similar gap between English learners and native English speakers in high school.

Fortunately, we have learned much about what contributes to these circumstances. In a report entitled "The Silent Epidemic," roughly half of student dropouts (47 percent) said a major reason for dropping out was that classes were not interesting. They report being bored and disengaged from high school. More than two thirds of respondents (69 percent) said they were not motivated or inspired to work hard, and the same number said they would have worked harder if more was demanded of them.

This same report presents some convincing findings as to potential solutions. One promising statistic is that more than 80 percent of dropouts said their chances of staying in school would have increased if classes provided opportunities for real-world learning. Expectations from a caring adult is also a critical factor, with the majority of dropouts said that higher expectations from teachers and parents and improved supervision in the classroom would have helped keep them in school.

Service-learning is a teaching method that engages students by making their education and community relevant. Through the application of academic, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, students design and implement projects that create real and meaningful change in their schools and communities. It is a method that has been proven successful both in class and after school. The potential for service-learning to address dropout and close the achievement gap rests in the focus on real-world application of learned skills, opportunities to develop leadership and explore career pathways, teachers engaging with students and setting high expectations for students ability to create an impact on the community, as well as student voice called for in both the planning and implementation of a service project.

A wealth of research demonstrates service-learning's success as a youth development tool. It enhances students' sense of self-efficacy, improves self-esteem, and decreases their likelihood to engage in at-risk behavior. When service-learning occurs in school or after school, it improves school attendance, overall academic achievement and strengthens youth-adult relationships, both in the home and at school. The 2007 Growing to Greatness study found that over 85% percent of principals from U.S. schools with service-learning programs reported a positive impact on students' civic and school engagement, school climate, the larger community's view of youths as a valuable resource, and teacher satisfaction.

Service-learning is a tool proven to address the challenges of student engagement which has been identified as an issue throughout San Diego County.