

## The Case for Service-Learning

### **Executive Summary**

- Behavior leading to suspension and expulsion is a pathway that increases the likelihood for students to drop out of school.
- Engaging students is the key to preventing dropout.
- Service-learning is an effective teaching strategy that engages students.

### **Dropout Crisis**

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. California public schools show this achievement gap clearly in the results of the 2006 California Standards Test. In English and Math, Hispanic and African American students were approximately 30% proficient, while Caucasian, Asian, and Filipino students were approximately 60% proficient.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

### **Dropout Prevention**

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. The key factor to prevent dropout is engaging students.<sup>3</sup>

### **Service-Learning Engages Students**

Service-learning is a teaching strategy that engages students by making their education 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.<sup>4</sup> Teachers engaging students in service-learning set high expectations for students' ability to impact the community by empowering students to plan and implement service projects.

A wealth of research demonstrates service-learning's success as a youth engagement tool. It enhances students' sense of self-efficacy, improves self-esteem,<sup>5</sup> and decreases their likelihood to engage in at-risk behavior.<sup>6</sup> Service-learning has the potential to improve attendance. Eighty-six percent of students at low-performing schools said their feelings would be more positive if they were engaged in service-learning at school.<sup>7</sup> Service-learning improves academic achievement as evident from Orange County's ACCESS program showing that 87% of the students achieved proficiency in the standards taught through the service-learning projects.<sup>8</sup> The 2007 Growing to Greatness<sup>9</sup> 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 teaching strategy proven to address the challenges of student engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> Achievement Gap Fact Sheet (<http://www.cde.ca.gov/eo/in/se/agfactsheet.asp>)

<sup>2</sup> The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts (March 2006)

<sup>3</sup> The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts (March 2006)

<sup>4</sup> Effective Practices for Engaging At-Risk Youth in Service, Youth Service America

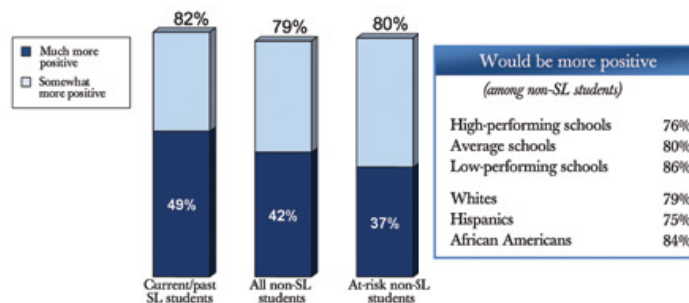
<sup>5</sup> Evaluation of CASSL Phase II/Year One Goals and Objectives: California After School Service-Learning Initiative (February 2005) *In 2004, the SAVY Leaders, Volunteer San Diego's afterschool service-learning club, were evaluated using the California Healthy Kids Survey. The California Healthy Kids Survey was used with the assumption that high-quality service-learning afterschool programs provide strong external assets for participants, leading to increased internal assets and civic development. Youth that participated in SAVY Leaders scored 30% higher in school environment external assets than average high school students across California. Specifically regarding external assets, SAVY Leaders scored 28% higher with caring relationships and 20% higher with high expectations. Regarding internal assets, youth participating in SAVY scored 33% higher in self-efficacy.*

<sup>6</sup> Violence prevention and young adolescents' participation in community youth service (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9890362?dopt=Abstract>)

<sup>7</sup> Engaged for Success: Service-Learning as a Tool for High School Dropout Prevention – Figure 4 (April 2008)

**Figure 4: Service Learning Has Potential To Improve Attendance**

*How have/would your feelings about going to school change if your school had classes directly tied to service learning?*



<sup>8</sup> Orange County Department of Education – Alternative, Community and Correctional Education Schools and Services (ACCESS) *The purpose of ACCESS is to care for, teach and inspire all to discover their potential, develop their character, and maximize their learning so they may become successful contributors to society. In July 2003, ACCESS served 16, 921 students at over 100 sites throughout the county. ACCESS students consist of 2/3 racial or ethnic minorities, approximately 50% Latinos. Students in ACCESS are referred by other districts, social service agencies, and probation and incarceration facilities. ACCESS students are also home schooled, young parents, or homeless. Students in ACCESS were engaged in service-learning projects that address the health of the diverse community.*

<sup>9</sup> Growing to Greatness 2007 – The State of Service Learning (2007)