



# TALK IT UP

## ADVOCATING FOR SERVICE-LEARNING

ISSUE FOUR

Helping our members make powerful allies for service-learning is one of the founding purposes of the National Service-Learning Partnership. This *Talk It Up* is the fourth in a year-long series to help members advocate more effectively on behalf of service-learning. Many of you tell us that you don't think of yourselves as advocates, yet you recognize the need for the support and resources that advocacy can secure. In earlier issues of *Talk It Up*, service learning leaders—young people, educators, community leaders, parents, and researchers—have described ways to make the case for service-learning to fellow educators, policymakers, and students. We hope the series will provide a 360-degree review of the many issues at stake in promoting service-learning.

*Anthony Welch, chair of the National Service-Learning Partnership Board of Directors*

## WHY DON'T MORE PEOPLE LISTEN WHEN WE TALK ABOUT SERVICE-LEARNING?

*By Amy Lane and Peter Mitchell*

### Why should they?

Educators are busy people. Teachers, principals and administrators across the country are struggling with budget cuts and new forms of accountability. They are looking for solutions, not new challenges. In this environment, the only reason for them to learn more about a complex pedagogy such as service-learning is if it can help them *now*.

Our challenge—if we want them to listen to what we say about service-learning—is to figure out what “help” means to them. And then we must try to make that help available through service-learning and through our efforts as service-learning advocates.

This way of thinking about how to promote service-learning uses a “social marketing” approach. Social marketing practitioners create programs that encourage people to change their behavior in ways that improve their lives and the lives of others. One well-known example is the “designated driver” effort, which helped reduce drunk driving not because it had a snappy slogan but because it solved the problem faced by the “target audience”—people who drink alcohol. People wanted to drink alcohol at places to which they needed to drive. Asking one person to refrain from drinking and take on the driving task allowed

other passengers to drink alcohol, yet still return home without hurting themselves or others.

To promote service-learning, we have to think the same way: How can we solve the problems teachers, administrators and policymakers face?

A critical mass within each of these groups is more likely to listen to us when we *help them on their own terms*. Here are four critical steps for meeting this challenge.

**1 “See” service-learning as the groups of people we must influence see it.** When it comes to school and instructional reforms, many types of people can be involved—students, parents, teachers, school and district administrators, and school board members as well as civic, community and business leaders. We must learn more about each of these groups’ perspectives, perceptions, priorities, and potential influence. How do they think about improving curriculum and teaching? How does service-learning fit into their agendas? Who are the “influentials” within each of these groups and what is their agendas? Above all, we must listen so that we understand others’ needs and challenges. People will be more ready to listen to us when we show that we have listened to them.

**2 Determine who is most likely to use or support service-learning now.** These are the people to target first. We must focus on those whose beliefs and actions make it easiest for them to give service-learning a try. This is the behavior change we want. As with any such change, some members of each group we are trying to influence are “early adopters,” but the majority wait to adopt, and some won’t change for years to come, if at all. We must reach the potential early adopters and then expand their number so that we reach a tipping point where others start to follow. Research done to date has shown that early service-learning adopters (practitioners or supporters) are most likely to be people who want to see students’ school work connected in concrete and important ways to real-world needs, who regard an ethic of service as critical to good citizenship, who believe that service work reinforces values that make schools more hospitable environments for learning, and so on. We must find these people.

**3 Figure out what these potential adopters want and address their needs.** If we can speak about service-learning in terms of what people want, they will listen. We have to determine how service-learning can help them and develop short, clear statements as to the benefits service-learning confers through helping them to meet their obligations and realize their hopes and expectations. These statements should offer the groups we want to influence benefits that are worth the change we are asking them to make—to adopt or support service-learning. And these messages need to be complemented by supports that make change less daunting. People don’t change unless what they are giving up (old ways of behaving) is offset by what they are getting through new ways of behaving. Thus we have to offer our target groups a package of benefits that include both reasons to practice or promote service-learning tailored to their specific needs as well as supports to make it

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easier for them to do so. These benefits must make service-learning appealing on many levels—personal, social and moral. People are more likely to engage in a new behavior if it is similar to and compatible with what they are already doing, it is relatively simple to do, and it provides immediate rewards. Since service-learning is a demanding pedagogy, it is especially important that we focus on improving its rewards for potential users or promoters.

**4 Support potential adopters in taking first steps towards using or supporting service-learning.** We have to make adoption easier by lowering the barriers to change while increasing the benefits to doing so. And we have to help people move through the change process on terms they can manage. People are more likely to listen to us when we offer concrete ways for them to make “trial runs” of practicing or supporting service-learning. We can find new ways for people to sample such new behaviors by experimenting with a mini service-learning project or a small service-learning advocacy action. Whomever we target—policymakers, educators, parents, community leaders—will make decisions based on the benefits they believe they will receive.

To promote service-learning, we must work as social marketers across the United States, at local, state, tribal, and national levels. Meeting the challenge of rooting service-learning in schools will require many different groups advancing its growth, success, and sustainability. We have to convince these many actors (ranging from students to teachers to state education officials to members of Congress) to behave in new ways so that they either use service-learning as a teaching practice in their classrooms and schools or they support its use.

By working as social marketers, we are much more likely to increase the number of potential service-learning users and supporters who are listening to us.

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To order the National Commission on Service-Learning’s final report, *Learning In Deed: The Power of Service-Learning in American Schools* or the associated videos, call 1-800-819-9997.