

# The value of service learning

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I'm a big proponent of students making community service an active part of their education. In our school, we call it service learning. Students at my school, through various student groups and organizations, regularly have several required hours of community service throughout the year. We do this not only because service helps in college and scholarship applications and when students consider trades or vocational training colleges, but also because service gives students unique life experiences likely to affect choices they make now. These choices will affect the rest of their lives. I am concerned, however, that community service is neither required nor encouraged in every school and that we aren't fully realizing the benefit of service.

Service is more than putting in hours. At our school, we require students to write down what they thought about their efforts. We want them to reflect on their time investment. It's an essential connection between their life and their community, and it develops empathy. Teachers can teach about society and its needs, but until a young person steps into a shelter or helps a disabled teen with a softball game, they do not fully grasp both their potential to effect change and the ways their lives influence others. Learning happens not only in the classroom, but also beyond.

As hard as teaching about society is, it is equally difficult to quantify the value of these students' service experiences. As educators, parents and advisors, our instincts tell us that a student who has stepped out of the classroom to see the world at work -- and sometimes the world in need -- is better prepared to make decisions about his or her future. College admissions officers recognize the value of these interactions, too. In some ways, admissions is a murky science, but colleges do consider community service, internships and other activities when determining a student's fit for their campus.