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Meaningful Service Learning

Why our schools need to act now

As a service learning consultant, I am regularly asked: What is meaningful service learning? Service Learning becomes meaningful when we start by asking the simple question, “Why?” Why do service learning? Why care? Why do all schools need to act? As we move toward a more conceptual, connected, and personalised curriculum we must answer these important questions.

I believe every school should have a service learning program for students; connecting conceptual understandings of community needs to empower students to take action. It is also our charge to prepare our students with essential trans-disciplinary and dispositional skills (21st century skills) for a rapidly changing future. A vision and mission of a school must be actualised through an effective service learning program, one that gives students opportunities for learning through: collaboration, communication, research, reflection, critical thinking, problem solving, and opportunities to demonstrate that they are indeed caring.

Preparing our students for life beyond school starts with an authentic task: one that is real and connects with the real world. Providing students with opportunities to have choice is what makes it meaningful. Students graduating and continuing to be actively involved with service in university and beyond is evidence that service learning is intrinsic. Students become intrinsically motivated by doing what they are passionate about, whilst meeting community needs at the same time.



Students need choice so they can follow their passion. Choosing service that meets an authentic need in their community requires schools to have an action plan aligned with service learning. This plan should have: ownership from the school and community, shared understanding of the community needs, student leadership/mentorship, professional learning, budget, resources, partners and collaboratives, opportunities for service activities with the community, portfolios, meaningful curriculum integration and assessment.

Ask yourself, “Does my school have a meaningful service learning program?” If not, perhaps you need to help start just that! 

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