



Service Learning Resource

What is Service Learning?

Service learning is the process of engaging students in developing a service project for their community, implementing the project, and reflecting on the experience. Service learning projects are particularly viable work-based learning activity during COVID-19 when certain activities are no longer available to students.

Why is it Important?

Research has found that service learning experiences are associated with increased self-esteem, access to same-age peers without disabilities, improved perceptions of students with disabilities, career exploration, as well as communication, problem-solving, social, reflection, functional, and job-specific skills¹. Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals addressing job skills and transition after high school can be taught through participation in a service learning experience aligned with transition assessment data². Furthermore, incorporating same-age peers without disabilities as equal participants in the service learning experience increases student's access to general education curriculum and incorporates opportunities for social skills practice, both of which are important predictors of improved postsecondary outcomes³. Through participation in service learning, students with disabilities are seen as valuable members of society and capable of serving others, not just as recipients of service themselves⁴. Students have the opportunity to implement many of the same skills needed in job placements while also enacting change in their communities and reflecting on the experience. This is especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many communities are faced with income insecurity and there are ample volunteer opportunities.

Steps for Developing Service Learning⁵

1. Assess the Resources and Needs of Your Community and School

- Teachers and providers should support students with disabilities and their same-age peers in reaching out to existing school and community organizations to assess areas of need for service in the community as well as existing service projects that students may be able to participate in.
- Include students with disabilities in this process as active leaders, practicing critical thinking and decision-making skills.

1 Abernathy & Obenchain, 2001; Brill, 1994; Dymond et al., 2007; Kleinert et al. 2015.

2 Cease-Cook, Fowler, Test, 2015.

3 Athamanah & Cushing, 2019; Carter et al., 2012; Cease-Cook et al., 2015; Dymond et al., 2007.

4 Brill, 1994.

5 Kleinert et al., 2004.



2. Develop Community and School Partnerships

- The teacher and provider should aid students in reaching out to organizations that may be able to provide guidance and support throughout the service project, such as other school organizations, local churches, townships, park districts, nonprofit organizations, and senior centers.
- Students with disabilities are able to practice communication and social skills that might be useful in the work environment and demonstrate their ability to be providers of valued service.

3. Set Clear Educational Goals and Curriculum

- Teachers and providers should set educational goals and methods of student progress monitoring based on the nature of the service learning project.
 - Examples of educational goals include: initiating social interactions, developing a budget, creating professional emails, or counting supplies.
 - Examples of progress monitoring include: student, teacher, and provider data collection, student reflections, and letters from partnering organizations.

4. Choose Project and Begin Planning

- As a group, decide on the final service learning project. Include students with disabilities as equal participants in the decision-making process.
- In order for the service learning project to have a sustaining impact, students should plan for the continuation of the goals of the service learning project after the direct service has concluded. This may involve working with community partners to sustain funding for the service learning project, or planning for student involvement in subsequent years.

5. Plan Project in Detail

- Students with and without disabilities should collaborate to develop a specific timeline of the project, a budget, and delegation of responsibilities for both the individual students and any partnering organizations.
- This step offers a great opportunity for practicing task management, money skills, and working as a team for all students.

6. Seek Necessary Funding and Resources

- If needed, students should reach out to other school organizations, local businesses, and community organizations to secure funding.

7. Implement and Manage the Project

- Once the project launches, teachers and providers should continually evaluate student progress, involving students in the process as well.
 - This may involve assisting students in self-monitoring and data collection on IEP objectives such as time on task or social interaction initiations.

8. Devise Reflection Activities

- Teachers and providers should implement ongoing opportunities for reflection through assignments as well as discussion with same-age peers without disabilities. Some examples of assignments that would be helpful for reflection include picture portfolios, and video assignments that document the student's experience participating in the project.

9. Assess and Evaluate Your Service Learning Program

- At the conclusion of the project, students, teachers, and providers should take part in evaluating the program using student, teacher, and provider data and reflection, interviews with community partners, and surveys of service recipients, if applicable.

10. Celebrate Students' Achievements

- Teachers and providers should devise opportunities to celebrate students' efforts in the service learning project and to thank their community partners. Doing so helps to foster student ownership and pride.

11. Include the Service Learning Project into Alternate Portfolios

- Data collected by the student, letters from community partners, and any reflection materials are great examples of what can be included in a student's portfolio.

COVID Safe Service Learning Ideas:

- **Food Drive:** students can be involved in developing flyers and setting up community dropboxes as well as reaching out to local food pantries to organize a community food drive. Students can practice skills such as: communication, computer skills, transportation, and advocacy.
- **Reading to Young Children:** students can practice reading, or writing their own stories using knowledge of the elements of a story. To be COVID safe, students can practice computer skills by recording themselves reading at home or participating in a live Zoom session with the partnering class. Students can also practice communication skills by reaching out to local daycare centers or younger grades in their community to partner with.
- **Card making for essential workers:** students have the opportunity to learn about different essential workplaces, and practice writing and spelling.
- **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Drive and Distribution for Local Hospitals and Homeless Shelters:** like the food drive, students can develop flyers, set up drop boxes for PPE, and reach out to local hospitals and shelters to organize distribution of supplies. This is a great opportunity to work on computer skills, transportation, communication, and learning about proper COVID safety protocols.
- **Organizing a Dinner Donation for Local Hospital Staff:** Students can reach out to local restaurants and business to seek food and monetary donations, and to the local hospital to organize a COVID safe drop off of meals. This allows students to practice communication and budgeting.
- **Starting a Community Vegetable Garden:** Teachers and providers can distribute low maintenance vegetable plant seeds and potting equipment so that students can start low maintenance vegetables in their homes in order to grow a community vegetable garden. This project provides the opportunity for a science lesson regarding plants and nutrition.

Adaptations and Accommodations in Service Learning Experiences

While accommodations and modifications for any student should be individualized, here are some recommendations from the Tennessee Department of Education that may be utilized in a remote service learning setting:

- Utilize accessibility software such as speech-to-text and text reader programs.
- Incorporate assistive technology devices into the virtual classroom such as Proloquo2Go, Tap-to-Talk, or Boardmaker via the share screen function during video conferencing.
- Allow students to dictate written assignments such as emails, stories, or cards relevant to the service learning project.
- Provide daily and activity schedules with visuals and frequent breaks during virtual learning.
- Simplify service learning reading materials and correspondence with partnering organizations by providing relevant information at an appropriate Lexile reading level.
- Make visuals accessible to students with visual impairments by utilizing large print and high contrast materials. Utilize the closed captioning and chat functions on video conferencing platforms for students with hearing impairments.
- Provide activity instructions in multiple formats including written, auditory, visual, video, and step-by-step directions.
- Modify tasks such as sending emails to community partners by providing a template for students to fill in.
- Work with parents to develop reinforcement procedures and utilization of sensory tools during instruction.

Works Cited

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