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. During COVID-19, these projects have the potential to serve as a substitute for community-based work-based learning experiences that 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, career exploration, communication, problem-solving, social interactions, reflection, daily living skills, and job-specific skills. Service learning is also associated with improved perceptions of students with disabilities. Service-learning experiences that are aligned with transition assessments can also help students work on their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals that address job skills and the transition to life after high school. Furthermore, incorporating same-age peers without disabilities as equal participants in the service-learning experience increases students' access to general education curriculum and incorporates opportunities for social skills practice, both of which are important predictors of improved postsecondary outcomes. By participating in service-learning, students with disabilities are seen as valuable members of society and capable of serving others, not just as recipients of service themselves. 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. Service-learning is especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic when many communities are faced with income insecurity and there are ample volunteer opportunities.

Steps for Developing Service-Learning

1. **Assess the Resources and Needs of Your Community and School**
    *   Teachers should support students with disabilities and their same-age peers in assessing areas of need in the community and existing service projects that students may be able to join.
    *   Include students with disabilities in this process as active leaders, practicing critical thinking and decision-making skills.

2. **Develop Community and School Partnerships**
   - Teachers 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 provide valued service.

3. **Set Clear Educational Goals and Curriculum**
   - Teachers 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, and counting supplies
   - Examples of progress monitoring include:
     - Student and teacher 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 to continue working on 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 a responsibility delegation list for each individual student and any partnering organizations.
   - For all students, this step offers a great opportunity to practice task management, money skills, and working as a team.

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 should continually evaluate student progress and involve students in the evaluation process as well. This may involve assisting students with self-monitoring and collecting data on IEP goals, such as remaining on task or initiating social interaction.

8. **Develop Reflection Activities**
   - Teachers should provide opportunities for reflection through assignments and discussions with same-age peers without disabilities. Some examples of assignments that would encourage reflection are 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 and teachers should evaluate the program using student and teacher data and reflections, interviews with community partners, and surveys of service recipients if applicable.
10. **Celebrate Students' Achievements**
   - Teachers should celebrate students' efforts in the service-learning project and thank their community partners, helping foster student ownership and pride.
11. **Include the Service-Learning Project in Alternate Portfolios**
   - Some great examples of what can be included in a student's portfolio are data collection, letters from community partners, and student reflection materials.

COVID Safe Service-Learning Ideas

- **Plan a Food Drive:** Students can develop flyers, set up community drop boxes, and reach out to local food pantries to organize a community food drive. Students can practice their communication, transportation, advocacy, and computer skills.
- **Read to Young Children:** Students can practice reading or writing their own stories. To be COVID safe, students can record themselves reading at home or participate in a live Zoom session with the partnering class. Students can also practice their communication skills by reaching out to local daycare centers or other schools in their community to set up partnerships.
- **Make Cards for Essential Workers:** Students can learn about different essential jobs and practice writing and spelling.
- **Host a 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 supply distribution. This is a great opportunity to work on computer skills, transportation, communication, and following proper COVID safety protocols.
- **Organize a Dinner Donation for Local Hospital Staff:** Students can reach out to local restaurants and business to seek food and monetary donations. They can contact local hospitals to organize a COVID safe meal drop off. This service-learning project allows students to practice communication and budgeting.
- **Start a Community Garden:** Teachers can distribute low maintenance plant seeds and potting equipment so that students can grow fruits and vegetables in their homes to transfer to a community garden. This service-learning project also covers science standards and teaches students about 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.
- Allow students to dictate written assignments related to the service-learning project.
- Utilize assistive technology devices, such as Proloquo2Go, Tap-to-Talk, or Boardmaker, in the virtual classroom.
- Give your students visual daily and activity schedules.
- Provide frequent breaks during virtual learning.
- Ensure service-learning reading materials are written at an appropriate Lexile reading level.
- Make sure any visual supports are accessible to students with visual impairments by utilizing large print and high contrast materials.
- Use closed captioning and chat functions on video conferencing platforms to ensure students with hearing impairments can access the information.
- Provide activity instructions in multiple formats including written, auditory, visual, video, and step-by-step directions.
- Provide student templates for tasks such as sending emails to community partners.
- Work with families to develop reinforcement procedures and utilize sensory tools during instruction.
- Use visual organizers when teaching and facilitating discussions such as graphic organizers, Venn diagrams, and flow charts.

Sources

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