

# Generating Youth Power

A Community Guide to Engage  
Young People in Service-Learning



Dear Friends,

Like you, we're in the business of changing people's lives for the better. We share your deep concern for our planet and the future it holds for today's and tomorrow's youth.

We have met with leaders from around the country and the world who agree with one thing: youth must have a place at the table in turning the tide of our environment, our economy, and the care for frail and at-risk populations. Not only that, we must steward youth to develop their innate abilities to become agents of positive change.

Time is of the essence and we must move in ways that are swift and effective. It is incumbent upon community organizations that serve Tennessee's youth to guide them to become the civic leaders we need.

Within these pages is a brief introduction to an instructional methodology that accomplishes all of these tasks. Service-learning is an action-oriented, results-driven method that works. It does so without years of education or thousands of dollars. By combining existing learning objectives with youth participation in tackling real community problems, we find that youth learn more, care more, and increase their own well-being and positive behaviors, all the while growing into responsible citizens. We have years of experience and evaluation data to share with you that validate these claims.

Thank you for taking the time to learn more about service-learning. When you're ready, we're here to help you navigate all the necessary resources you need to incorporate it into your program. We look forward to working with you.

In Service,

The Board and Staff of Volunteer Tennessee



“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. ... Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. ... And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

- Marianne Williamson, as written for Nelson Mandela

# Have you ever thought, “If we could harness the power of youth, we just might be able to solve the world’s energy crisis?”

While lofty, that’s actually not a thought without basis.

While we’d never advocate tying up a bunch of teenagers to crank a turbine, we can consider what it takes to involve youth in solving some of the most critical issues facing both our local communities and the world at large.

As an agency that serves youth, you’re probably already doing just that - although with hard-won success. There never seems to be enough resources to impact all youth, keep them safe and healthy, and give them the leadership skills to become agents for positive change.

Yet, with courage and valor, you march on... because you **KNOW** what youth can accomplish when given the right tools. You push the right button and that energy explodes, allowing youth to use their unique skills and problem-solving abilities to accomplish great things.

But, what is the right button to push? And how can you be sure that the energy you are generating is used to create and not destroy? These are the age-old enigmatic questions that keep us working. Even Albert Einstein might have had a few words to say on the subject without offering the magic equation.



At the dawn of a new decade in a 3G world, we now have the answers you seek. With refined theories and solid evaluation results, we’ve had years of experience implementing **service-learning** programs for youth with positive outcomes. All over Tennessee, thousands of youth have been engaged in service-learning programs, and, as a result, are positively contributing to their communities - doing their part to alleviate hunger and poverty, clean up neighborhoods, become peacemakers, care for the frail, mentor, and, yes, even solve the energy crisis one neighborhood at a time.

Throughout this booklet, we want to take this opportunity to introduce you to the idea of **service-learning**, share some of its basic principles, tout statewide successes, and offer you more resources to help you become the ultimate “power source” for the youth you serve.



## WHO WE ARE:

*Volunteer Tennessee is a 25-member bi-partisan board appointed by the Governor. Its mission is to encourage volunteerism and community service. Flagship programs include AmeriCorps and Learn and Serve America.*

# FLIPPING THE SWITCH: WHAT IS SERVICE-LEARNING?

Service-learning is an instructional methodology that integrates high-quality volunteer service with learning objectives to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility, and, ultimately, to strengthen communities. Practitioners facilitate learning by creating opportunities for youth to understand and analyze service experiences in greater context.

One example, which we'll explore in depth later, involves youth developing a peer anti-drug education campaign. Youth take a leadership role in identifying the core issue and developing a plan of action. Through the action steps, they use art and grammar skills to develop posters; they gain knowledge of chemistry and biology to investigate the harmful effects of drugs; and they even explore drama skills by coming up with skits to perform for their peers. At the end of the campaign - through reflection, demonstration and celebration - youth develop a deeper understanding of the issue, create interventions for their peers, are less likely to use drugs themselves and are more likely to continue teaching what they have learned to their peers. Concurrently, they're gaining interpersonal skills, self-esteem, and leadership skills.

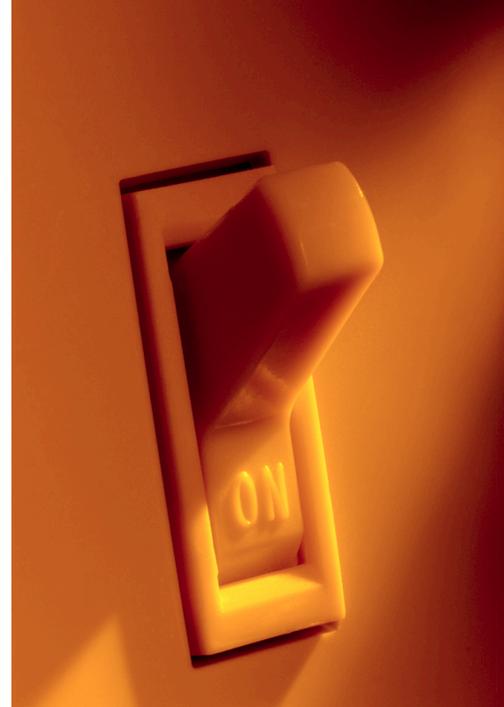
Service-learning isn't simply tied to school curricula or a particular age group. Service-learning can happen anywhere and is highly effective when implemented in community-based organizations that serve youth.

Whether in or out of the classroom, the principles are the same: active learning plus student involvement in tackling real issues equals success.

Service-learning occurs in an ongoing cycle that includes five distinct steps, although each step may be re-visited at any time during the cycle to excavate new levels of understanding. Because of the ongoing nature of service activities and learning, the cycle is never really complete but deepens as long as youth continue to participate and carry their involvement forward in their lives.

The five steps in the service-learning cycle include:

- **Investigation** - Youth investigate community issues which align with their interests, skills and broader learning objectives.
- **Preparation** - Youth determine the resources that are needed, take an inventory of their individual assets, plan the activities, and recruit the help of others.
- **Action** - This step is where the rubber hits the road through community service. Youth are active in all parts of service and take leadership roles in accomplishing goals.
- **Reflection** - This step may be the most critical of all in the service-learning cycle. This is where students not only assess their accomplishments, but they also discuss in meaningful and creative ways the impact of their service for themselves and their beneficiaries. *Reflection should happen during each service-learning step so that students constantly evaluate what they are doing and why they're doing it, as well as refine the long-term vision for their service, including key missing pieces and new applications of their activities.*
- **Celebration/Demonstration** - Youth need to take time out to celebrate their successes. Also, it is imperative that youth educate others about their service. When they can teach what they have learned, then true learning has taken place.



“Education should not be the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”

- William  
Butler Yeats



## POWER SURGE: ENSURING HIGH QUALITY

Though each service-learning project is uniquely tailored to meet specific learning goals and community needs, several common elements are critical for success and should be addressed by practitioners throughout the process. Recently, the National Youth Leadership Council and RMC Research Corporation convened a series of “reactor panels” in order to vet eight standards of high quality service-learning practice, which were supported by years of research around the United States. The panels were composed of young people, teachers, school and district administrators, community members, staff from community-based organizations, policy-makers and others interested in service-learning.

Volunteer Tennessee was fortunate to host one of these panels, and we strongly believe that the following standards, when incorporated into service-learning programs, infuse absolute success for students.

- **Meaningful Service** - Service-learning actively engages participants in meaningful and personally relevant service activities. Activities should be age and developmentally appropriate and address needs that are important to the community. The service leads to attainable and visible outcomes.
- **Connections to Learning Objectives** - Practitioners carefully guide projects to specific learning objectives, often connecting multiple subjects. Organizing food in a food bank might include learning about math, health, science, reading, just to name a few. Whatever the objec-

tive, learning is deepened because it is immediately useful.

- **Youth Ownership** - Young people are active partners in every aspect of a service-learning project, with strong voices in identifying community needs and planning activities. They also assess and share the results of the project. This empowers young people to take their rightful places as decision-makers.

- **Reflection** - Throughout the process, reflection is the key to growth and understanding. Young people use critical and creative thinking to ensure that the learning makes sense and has meaning for them. A variety of reflection activities -- including written, verbal, artistic

and non-verbal -- can be used to assess where youths are in the learning process, help them internalize the learning, provide opportunities for them to voice concerns and share feelings, and evaluate the project.

- **Diversity** - Service-learning fosters empathy for people of all different kinds of backgrounds, which gives people dignity and equality. Youth learn to develop interpersonal skills like conflict resolution from navigating different points of view.

- **Partnerships** - Service-learning builds bridges between youth and the broader community. By collaborating, partnerships can introduce youth to more people who are willing to work together for a common cause.

- **Progress Monitoring** - Youth collect evidence of community issues during their projects and share their findings with policy-makers, the media, and other community stakeholders.

- **Duration and Intensity** - Allowing several weeks or months for a specific project keeps youth engaged and offers enough time for young people to achieve high quality results. Learning deepens when enough time is given for all stages of the service-learning cycle.



# POWER TIP!

The National Commission on Service-Learning, chaired by former U.S. Senator John Glenn, studied the overall effects of service-learning in depth and offered some amazing baseline results. Shared below, these represent the pinnacle of our desires of working with youth:

- **Increased engagement** - Youth who participate in high quality service-learning programs become more active learners. Youth make the critical connection between knowledge they acquire and its use in the real world. Through service-learning, youth are taught to think critically, make key decisions, interact with others, and provide service that makes a difference to both themselves and their community.

- **Increased academic achievement** - When practitioners tie service activities to learning objectives, students show gains on measures of academic achievement. Service-learning that includes environmental activities, for example, helps students apply math skills (e.g., measurement and problem-solving) and science skills (e.g., prediction and knowledge of botany), if they are explicitly woven into the experience.

- **Improved thinking skills** - Service-learning helps youth improve their ability to analyze complex tasks, draw inferences from data, solve new problems, and make decisions. The degree to which improvements occur depends on how well practitioners get youth engaged in the service activities they are performing.

- **Improved character** - Service-learning promotes responsibility, trustworthiness and caring for others. Through service projects, youth learn not to let each other down or to disappoint those being served. Young people who participate in service-learning gain an ethic of service and volunteer more frequently.

- **Improved social behavior** - Young people who are active in service programs are less likely to engage in risky behavior. Service-learning provides a venue in which youth can be more successful and reinforces social behaviors that are crucial for success in the

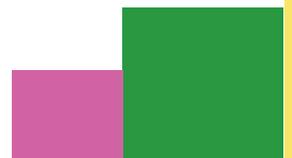


workplace.

- **Stronger ties to communities** - Service-learning gives youth a sense of belonging to and responsibility for their communities. Through service projects, young people often come to believe that they can make a difference in society. Some studies have established a strong connection between this sense of efficacy and academic achievement, as well as greater concern for personal health and well-being.

- **Exposure to new careers** - Through service-learning, youth encounter adults in careers that might otherwise remain hidden to them. They may meet social workers, park rangers, scientists, government workers, health professionals and others who work in community agencies. By assisting them and seeing how service relates to what they do, students acquire higher or more varied career aspirations, along with a realistic understanding of what levels of education and training they may need to attain the job.

- **Stronger community groups** - When young people form early connections with community groups through service activities, the groups themselves are often the beneficiaries. Young people can infuse a non-profit or civic group with energy and inspiration; become members of the volunteer force; help build awareness of the group's mission; and help an organization garner media attention.



# READING THE METER: PROVEN RESULTS IN TENNESSEE

While Volunteer Tennessee has administered service-learning grants for a number of years, we've most recently completed a federally funded program that is specific to community-based organizations and has garnered highly compelling and relevant findings.

From 2006-2009, the federal Corporation for National and Community Service -- through its Learn and Serve America program -- awarded Volunteer Tennessee funding to implement "Learn and Serve America Meth Free TN: Youth Edition," a statewide grant program that supported the integration of service-learning in afterschool programs to further statewide methamphetamine (meth) prevention initiatives by creating anti-meth communication products for youth by youth. Volunteer Tennessee sub-granted the funds to 15 community-based agencies, each receiving at least \$10,000 annually, and contracted with the University of Tennessee's Institute for Assessment and Evaluation (IAE) to provide ongoing evaluation of the program based on specific performance measures.

Each sub-grantee engaged at least 30 youth in service-learning activities for a minimum of 40 hours per semester. In all 15 agencies, youth planned, designed, created and promoted anti-meth communication products. In the third year, each program again produced at least one communication product related to meth prevention and provided that information to at least one community audience, with at least half presenting to a national audience at the National Service-Learning Conference.



"It was hard when... the Meth Task Force came to visit [my program]. I looked at him and he looked at me. He was the officer who took me from my house which was a meth lab. I really hated him [until] I learned that he probably saved my life."

- Participant in Meth Free TN Afterschool Program

Projects varied, all with palpable results. In one example, students presented at their local shopping mall where participants handed out backpack tags carrying an anti-meth message on one side and a place on the other for community members to sign their names to the pledge: "I pledge to remain meth free." Youth also presented an anti-meth message to students in grades K-2 and provided audience members with pledge cards and lollipop suckers carrying the message, "Only Suckers Do Meth."

“I reported a meth house in my neighborhood and they were arrested. I felt good that I played a part in getting meth out of my neighborhood.”

- Participant in Meth Free TN Afterschool Program

Another group created a comic book - complete with artwork and text - to distribute throughout the community. Another created a life-sized board game that gave players consequences for poor or healthy choices.

The levels of creativity, enthusiasm and participation were truly inspiring. And the grant results were equally so.

*At the end of the third year, 72 percent of students reported improvement in one or more areas of problem-solving skills. An astonishing 89 percent reported increases in social competence, caring relationships, autonomy, high expectations and having a sense of purpose. Site coordinators reported that youth experienced increased confidence and self-esteem, communication skills, and a sense of connectedness in anecdotal reports.*

**72%** of youth reported improvement in problem solving.

**89%** of youth reported increases in social competence, caring relationships, autonomy, high expectations and having a sense of purpose.

Agencies reported **147** new community partnerships.

- LSA Meth Free TN: Youth Edition evaluation results

Additionally, agencies involved reported a total of 147 new community partnerships forged as a result of the grant. These relationships were expected to continue, providing needed support to youth engaged in service-learning.

## ILLUMINATION: WHAT CAN YOU DO?

While grant funding opportunities may be available for your agency in the future, the good news is that you don't have to have any kind of start-up money to incorporate service-learning into your youth programs today.

As long as you have access to basic knowledge about service-learning and pledge to maintain the eight principles of high quality programs mentioned earlier, you can get started. Additionally, you would likely benefit from the advice of a seasoned professional. We invite you to contact Volunteer Tennessee staff at any time. If we can't directly provide the help you need, we can put you in touch with the best resources available and potentially help you partner with service-learning mentors in your area.

In February 2010, Volunteer Tennessee is hosting its First Annual Statewide Service-Learning Conference in Murfreesboro. Registration information is currently available on our website ([www.volunteertennessee.net](http://www.volunteertennessee.net)). This event is something we're committed to hosting each year, so if you miss the first one, we will continue to build the momentum of networking, information sharing and youth presentations. Keep checking our website or register for our bi-monthly service-learning newsletter, *Clues and News*, to keep up-to-date with the latest service-learning news and





information in Tennessee (see next section for newsletter registration details).

Also, we partner with Lions Quest International, an award-winning leader in youth character education programs, to host practitioner trainings throughout Tennessee. Lions Quest curricula teach a service-learning component that is transferable to any community setting. (Lions Quest website information can also be found in the next section.)

The youth you serve already have the raw power to make significant changes to your community, all while learning more deeply about the world in which they live. They just need you as a conduit to channel that energy in a positive direction. Are you ready to help them generate that power?

As it is inscribed on the base of The Torchbearer statue, a focal point on the campus of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, “One that beareth a torch standeth in shadow to give light to others.” Building a foundation of service through service-learning is what will solve the problems that come our way.

*Light the way for youth so that they may ignite their own torch with yours.*



## What Tennessee afterschool practitioners are saying:

“This is a really important and worthwhile program; [the] experience has been so rewarding.”

“Life-changing for this group of youth, their parents and families.”

“The biggest value is reaching kids that would have fallen through the cracks. These could have been the future dropouts.”

# ALTERNATIVE ENERGY: RESOURCES

To obtain more information on service-learning, grant opportunities or service-learning trainings in Tennessee or to subscribe to *Clues and News*, a bi-monthly service-learning newsletter, contact:

Volunteer Tennessee  
William R. Snodgrass Tennessee Tower  
312 Rosa L. Parks Avenue, 12th Floor  
Nashville, TN 37243-1102  
615.532.9250 phone  
800.404.8183 toll-free  
615.532.6950 fax  
volunteer.tennessee@tn.gov  
www.volunteertennessee.net

For more information on service-learning, please visit:

[www.servicelearning.org](http://www.servicelearning.org)  
[www.learnandserve.gov](http://www.learnandserve.gov)  
[www.service-learningpartnership.org](http://www.service-learningpartnership.org)  
[www.nylc.org](http://www.nylc.org)  
[www.lions-quest.org](http://www.lions-quest.org)



## 2006-2009 Learn and Serve America Meth Free TN: Youth Edition Subgrantees

Bells City Schools

Boys & Girls Clubs of TN Valley - Loudon Co./Lenoir City

Boys & Girls Clubs of TN Valley - Vestal

Break the Cycle, Inc.

Cannon County REACH Program

Franklin Co. Board of Education

Little Children of the World, Inc. - Camp Etowah

McNairy Co. Schools

Sonshine Avenue Ministry, Inc.

South Carroll Co. Special School District (Clarksburg School)

Tennessee Tech University - Upper Cumberland Child Care  
Resource & Referral (TTU/CCR&R)

Tennessee's Community Assistance Corporation (TCAC)

Tracy City Elementary

Trenton Housing Authority

YWCA of Bristol

“...Youth voice is crucial to the overall effectiveness of service-learning programs. Youth voice has a tremendous impact on program participation and program outcomes, both short term and long term.”



- Education Commission  
of the States

Supporting documentation for this booklet was obtained from the following sources:

Corporation for National and Community Service. *Students in Service to America*. Washington, DC, 2002. Print. (reprinted with permission)

“K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice,” nylc.org, National Youth Leadership Council, n.d.

Robinson, Dr. Stephanie, et al. *LSA Meth Free TN: Youth Edition Year 3 Project Summative Evaluation Report*, The Institute for Assessment and Evaluation. Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee at Knoxville, 2009. Print.



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Volunteer Tennessee  
William R. Snodgrass Tennessee Tower  
312 Rosa L. Parks Avenue, 12th Floor  
Nashville, TN 37243-1102  
615.532.9250 phone  
615.532.6950 fax  
[www.volunteertennessee.net](http://www.volunteertennessee.net)

