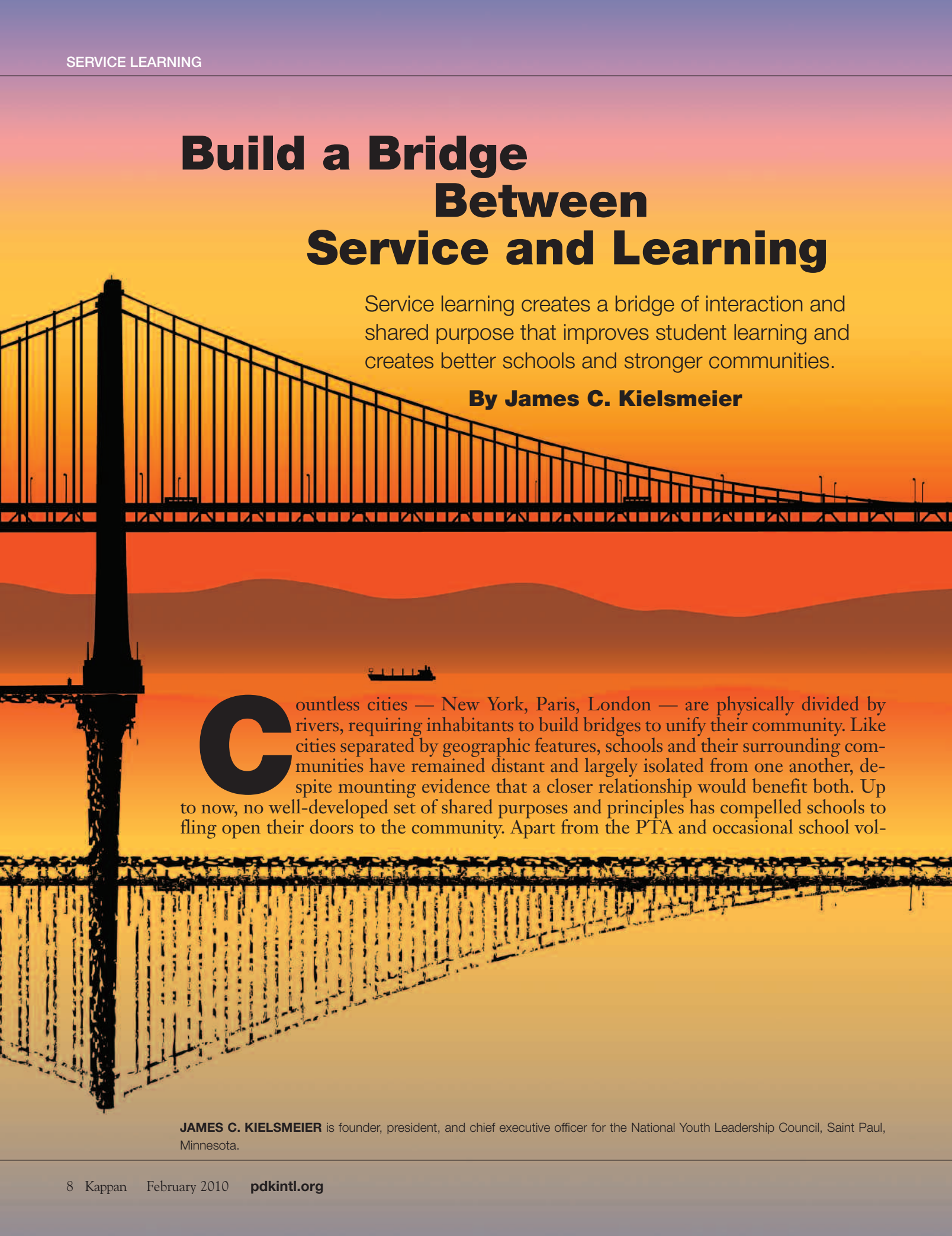


# Build a Bridge Between Service and Learning

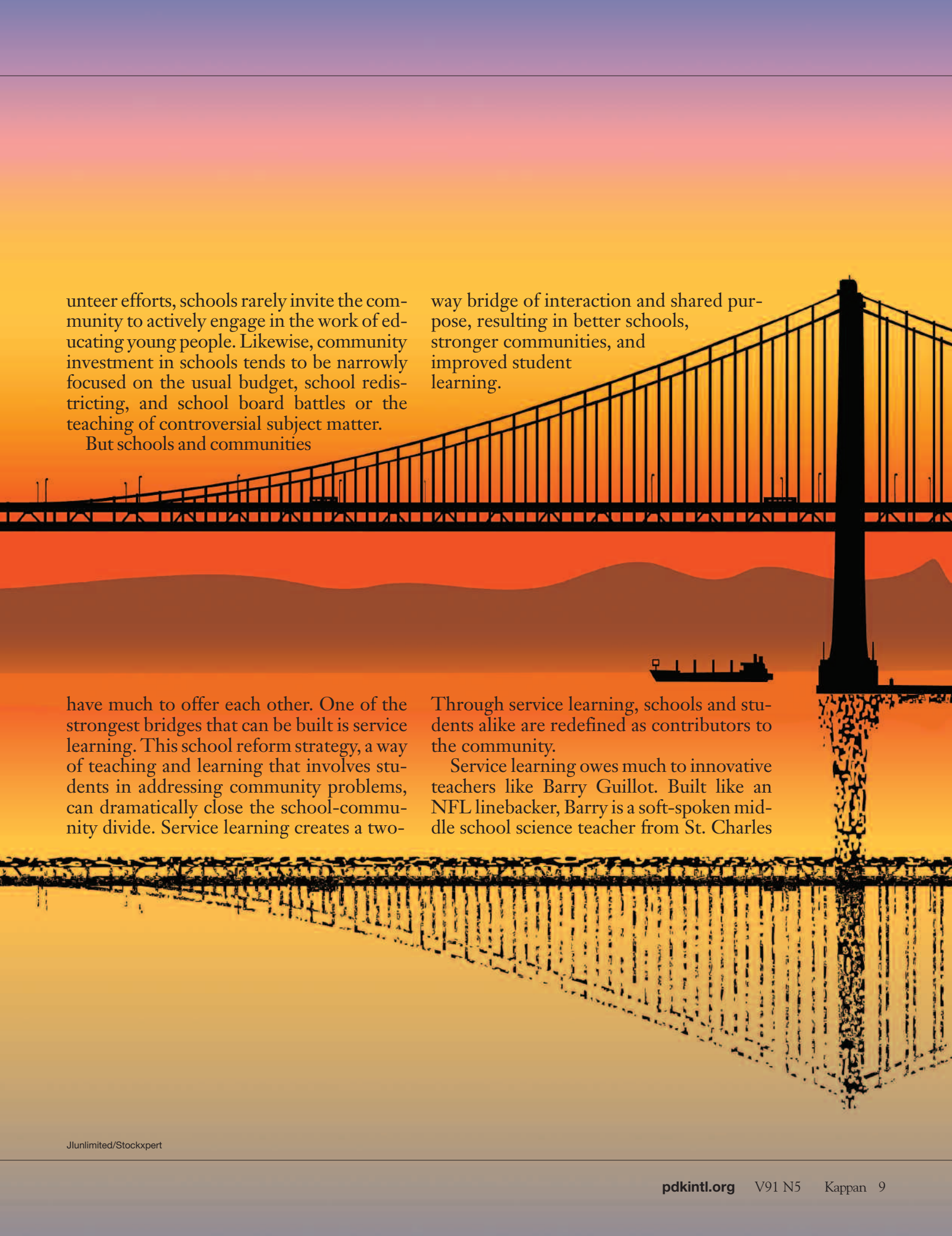
Service learning creates a bridge of interaction and shared purpose that improves student learning and creates better schools and stronger communities.

**By James C. Kielsmeier**



**C**ountless cities — New York, Paris, London — are physically divided by rivers, requiring inhabitants to build bridges to unify their community. Like cities separated by geographic features, schools and their surrounding communities have remained distant and largely isolated from one another, despite mounting evidence that a closer relationship would benefit both. Up to now, no well-developed set of shared purposes and principles has compelled schools to fling open their doors to the community. Apart from the PTA and occasional school vol-

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unteer efforts, schools rarely invite the community to actively engage in the work of educating young people. Likewise, community investment in schools tends to be narrowly focused on the usual budget, school redistricting, and school board battles or the teaching of controversial subject matter.

But schools and communities

way bridge of interaction and shared purpose, resulting in better schools, stronger communities, and improved student learning.

have much to offer each other. One of the strongest bridges that can be built is service learning. This school reform strategy, a way of teaching and learning that involves students in addressing community problems, can dramatically close the school-community divide. Service learning creates a two-

Through service learning, schools and students alike are redefined as contributors to the community.

Service learning owes much to innovative teachers like Barry Guillot. Built like an NFL linebacker, Barry is a soft-spoken middle school science teacher from St. Charles

*Middle school students (below) teach younger students how to plant and protect trees along the coast of Lake Pontchartrain.*

Parish, next door to New Orleans. For more than a decade, Barry and his successive classes of students have transformed a fragile 28-acre former dump site on Lake Pontchartrain into a living wetlands classroom. Students are introduced to the wetlands as kindergartners when they take part in community presentations on the need to be good environmen-

Community Service. Through this initiative — designed to improve student learning in science, technology, engineering, and math — Barry and his students will share their model of teaching environmental science with schools in Chicago and Minneapolis that are developing their own local environmental science projects. Partners such as the National Middle School Association, the American Association of School Administrators, and the non-profit Alliance to Save Energy provide additional technical expertise and curriculum support to participating schools. Similar grants from Learn and Serve America to school programs sponsored by Youth Service America and the Education Commission of the States represent the growing appreciation of the role that service can play as an ingredient of education reform when purposefully tied to curriculum.

### **A BRIEF HISTORY**

A form of experiential and progressive education that harkens back to John Dewey and even Aristotle, service learning has never been a mainstay of public education. Few teacher education programs have focused on this way of teaching, and some educators find it challenging to extend instruction beyond the physical walls of the school. According to a recent survey of K-12 principals, about 24% of schools in the United States offer students this experience-based method of teaching and learning (Spring, Grimm, and Dietz 2008). Service learning is more prevalent in high schools (35%) than it is in middle schools (25%) and elementary schools (20%), even though the benefits may be even greater in the younger grades.

Twenty years ago, dedicated educators largely based their support of service learning on professional wisdom and what they saw happening in and outside of their classrooms when they encouraged their students to tackle real-life issues in their communities. Making the case to parents and school administrators for service learning as a way to drive achievement was difficult. Advances in curriculum and professional development were led by nonprofits supported largely by private foundations and corporations; namely, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and State Farm Insurance.

For many years, large-scale adoption of service learning has been hampered by the lack of infrastructure to sustain it. The service learning movement lacked key components of lasting reform: consistent research-based practice standards, strong professional development, high-quality summative and formative evaluation, and a consistent funding base. In addition, the reduction of social studies classes and an increasing emphasis on basic skills and



Photos courtesy Barry Guillot

*Louisiana middle school students involved in the Wetland Watchers, seen working above, also painted shrimp boots (opposite page) with colorful images, filled them with fact sheets they created, and sent the packages to students studying wetlands in every state.*

tal stewards. Their instructors are Harry Hurst Middle School LaBranche Wetland Watchers, students from Barry's school who have been planting trees and exploring science at the nearby park-as-classroom. Now they demonstrate their new knowledge and skills, taking on the responsibilities of educators and coaches for young students, guiding them on how to test water for salinity and to identify local flora and fauna. As Barry says, quoting from a student's journal, "I think if the animals and plants could talk, they'd say that we're their heroes."

Over the next two years, their model will reach a new level through a service learning initiative sponsored by a federal grant to the National Youth Leadership Council from Learn and Serve America, a division of the Corporation for National and

test preparation, both the result of No Child Left Behind mandates, have hindered growth of curriculum-based service learning.

The 1994 National and Community Service Act was a major breakthrough for service learning, creating Learn and Serve America and bringing with it federal funds for service learning for every state education agency. It also provided a statutorily mandated National Service Learning Clearinghouse, which offers resources and information to teachers and other practitioners who want to do service learning in their classrooms or community organizations and to researchers who want to build on the base of existing knowledge.

Participation in service learning grew initially, but reauthorization of the 1994 legislation faltered until 2008. Funding for Learn and Serve remained flat — and in real terms, it declined. Ironically, many schools seem to have embraced the notion of service for young people — 68% of U.S. K-12 schools now recognize student service or offer service opportunities (Spring, Grimm, and Dietz 2008) — but most have neglected to link it to their school curricula, missing an important opportunity to improve academic rigor and risking a knight-in-shining-armor approach to volunteerism that fails to adequately recognize assets in the community. At many institutions of higher education, service programs fall under a community relations office rather than academic affairs.

## SIGNS OF CHANGE

Signs that service learning is poised for a new era of growth and expansion, however, are beginning to appear, the result of a persistent community of practitioners and advocates who would not go away and the demand for service opportunities from young people seeking to change their world. Constantly working to build the necessary infrastructure, they have achieved three pillars of support for service learning as a bridge between schools and communities: 1) a growing body of research on the academic, civic, and social outcomes of high-quality service learning and evidence-based standards for effective practice; 2) professional development models linked to standards that support teachers in classrooms today and budding growth in schools of education interested in service learning; and 3) new policy initiatives at the federal, state, and local levels that have brought new life and resources to the movement.

## K-12 SERVICE LEARNING STANDARDS

Academics and teacher researchers from across the education spectrum and other fields have stepped up efforts to bring scientific scrutiny to bear on service learning. These efforts have borne fruit

on several fronts, including the widely adopted K-12 Service Learning Standards for Quality Practice (see sidebar). These eight evidence-based standards provide teachers and other educators guidance for implementing service learning more effectively. In the United States, outlining projects in terms of the best practices represented by the standards has become a requirement for federal funding for service learning through Learn and Serve America grants, as well as state funding and private foundation grantmaking for service learning.



### K-12 Service Learning Standards for Quality Practice

**Meaningful Service:** Service learning actively engages participants in meaningful and personally relevant service activities.

**Link to Curriculum:** Service learning is intentionally used as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and content standards.

**Reflection:** Service learning incorporates multiple, challenging, reflection activities that are ongoing and that prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself and one's relationship to society.

**Diversity:** Service learning promotes understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants.

**Youth Voice:** Service learning provides youth with a strong voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating service learning experiences with guidance from adults.

**Partnerships:** Service learning partnerships are collaborative, mutually beneficial, and address community needs.

**Progress Monitoring:** Service learning engages participants in an ongoing process to assess the quality of implementation and progress toward meeting specified goals, and uses results for improvement and sustainability.

**Duration and Intensity:** Service learning has sufficient duration and intensity to address community needs and meet specified outcomes.

For a downloadable copy of the standards, their accompanying indicators of quality, and summaries of the research behind the standards, visit [www.nylc.org/standards](http://www.nylc.org/standards).

The Peace Corps has embraced the service learning standards for use by schools they serve in 74 countries. Internationally, Australia, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and Alberta, Canada, have also investigated adopting these standards in their

service learning efforts. These carefully crafted guidelines with their detailed indicators of progressive development mark service learning as a pedagogy of engagement applicable as a learning strategy for use in every level of schooling and every discipline.

**Service learning creates a two-way bridge of interaction and shared purpose, resulting in better schools, stronger communities, and improved student learning.**

The body of research currently being accumulated demonstrates that high-quality service learning can have powerful positive effects on K-12 students' academic performance and engagement, as well as their civic dispositions and interpersonal skills. (For a more detailed look at service learning research, see the article by Andrew Furco and Susan Root on page 16.)

### **Resources on Service Learning Research**

#### **The National Service Learning Clearinghouse**

A major repository for research, toolkits, sample curricula, bibliographies, fact sheets, and other resources for the promotion and practice of service learning. Thousands of resources are available in full online.

[www.servicelearning.org](http://www.servicelearning.org)

#### **Growing to Greatness**

Access six years of service learning research and policy information online to get a snapshot of the state of service learning.

[www.nylc.org/g2g](http://www.nylc.org/g2g)

### **INNOVATIONS IN TEACHER EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

One of the many challenges in bringing service learning to the classroom has been helping administrators and teachers become comfortable with the concept and confident in their ability to implement high-quality projects. As research has consistently supported the benefits of service learning, advocates have had increasing success in explaining service learning to preservice teachers, as well as those already teaching in the schools.

In 2003, Jeffrey Anderson and Joseph Erickson conducted a national study to determine the prevalence of service learning in preservice teacher education programs in the United States. They con-

cluded that while service learning had become a familiar concept, it was not yet a fundamental component of most teacher education programs. In their survey of 754 members of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education and 120 non-members, 59% reported including service learning. However, mirroring their counterparts in K-12 education, only 24% of programs had a service learning requirement for their students, and in all but a few programs, the use of service learning was confined to a small group of faculty members.

Faculty choose service learning for a variety of goals, according to Anderson and Erickson, and most often say they want to expose teacher candidates to the communities where they will teach. But they also rely on service learning to expose students to diversity issues, enhance their personal development, and prepare teacher candidates to use service learning with their own students.

Recent initiatives, however, hold promise for the scaling up of high-quality service learning in schools of education. For example, the National Center for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) is beginning to embrace the method, particularly in field experiences for teacher candidates. NCATE recently identified service learning as a characteristic of programs at the highest level of proficiency in terms of the design, implementation, and evaluation of field experiences and clinical practice.

Universities across the United States are also increasingly offering minors and certificate programs focused on service learning. Through engaging in community service and service learning activities and learning about the theoretical roots of service learning, students can earn a minor or certificate in service learning or leadership. (For a sample of programs, visit [www.servicelearning.org/instant\\_info/factsheets/he\\_facts/minors\\_\\_certs\\_he](http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/factsheets/he_facts/minors__certs_he).) A small number of higher education institutions now offer a major area of concentration that focuses on service learning as well.

Ongoing professional development for classroom teachers has likewise shown stepped-up efforts linked to the K-12 service learning standards. For the past three years, the University of Wisconsin-River Falls has offered graduate-level coursework and a Certificate of Excellent Practice in Service Learning, coordinated in cooperation with the National Youth Leadership Council. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards has shown increasing interest in service learning, and new professional development resources are springing up across the nation.

### **NATIONAL SERVICE RESURGENCE**

One of the strongest signs yet that service learning increasingly matters is the support that it's re-

ceiving from the White House. Under President Barack Obama, the United States is ushering in the largest expansion of national service since the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s. In spring 2009, Obama made two significant steps. He and Michelle Obama called on all Americans, students especially, to volunteer through United We Serve to help meet growing social needs resulting from the economic downturn. They charged citizens to identify unmet needs in their community, develop their own service projects, and engage others who are interested in the same issue — all of which is at the heart of service learning. As a result, students in Mississippi engaged in native plant restoration projects, Saint Paul, Minnesota elementary school students created early-childhood literacy resources, and high school students in Oklahoma improved their school environment by pulling weeds, painting benches, and planting a tree in remembrance of Sept. 11.

Even more significant, in April 2009, Obama signed the bipartisan Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act. Although the dramatic increases in the AmeriCorps program called for in the legislation received much press attention at the time, this legislation also did something new: It recognized service learning not only as a gateway to national service,

## Educator Resources on Curriculum and Professional Development

### Generator School Network (GSN)

This community of K-12 schools committed to improving service learning shares information and ideas on projects and best practices. The GSN online community allows school teams across the country to post, share, and comment on user-provided resources as well as to use research-based standards, assessments, and other professional development tools.

[gsn.nylc.org](http://gsn.nylc.org)

### The Providers Network

Established by the National Service Learning Partnership and the Compass Institute, the Providers Network connects service learning practitioners, including educators, service learning coordinators, and researchers, allowing communication across regions and practice areas.

[www.slprovidersnetwork.org](http://www.slprovidersnetwork.org)

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but also as a strategy for school improvement. The new law calls for high-quality service learning practice and curriculum that is rooted in evidence-based standards and encourages ongoing professional development.

***“What these students come to discover through service is that by befriending a senior citizen, or helping the homeless, or easing the suffering of others, they can find a sense of purpose and renew their commitment to this country that we love. . . . Because we must prepare our young Americans to grow into active citizens, this bill makes new investments in service learning.”***

**—President Barack Obama on signing the Serve America Act**

This is the first time since the Clinton Administration that the federal government has sought to bridge the service and education divide. Advocates for service learning are making every effort to link the U.S. Department of Education and the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) in shared goals that enhance quality teaching and learning through service learning. As the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind) comes up for renewal, traditional education advocates are working with service learning proponents to strengthen provisions that will allow teachers access to training in high-quality service learning practices and ongoing professional development.

Another new dimension to this piece of legislation is an awareness of the impact service learning can have on the schools that struggle the most to meet the educational needs of students. Recent research by Civic Enterprises (Bridgeland 2006) shows that the most prevalent explanations students give for leaving high school without a diploma include the following:

- Classes were not interesting or engaging (47%).
- They were not motivated or inspired to do the work (67%).
- They would have worked harder if they had been asked to do meaningful, high-quality work (66%).

High-quality service learning directly addresses these concerns by engaging the most at-risk students in making a measurable impact on community

issues that matter to them.

Dedicated educators like Edison Freire in North Philadelphia have brought service learning to this critical juncture. An immigrant from Ecuador, Freire was a frustrated biology teacher whose largely Latino students were bored with school but fascinated by digital technology. Philadelphia’s high school graduation rate of 55.5% places it in the unenviable company of the 50 largest school districts that graduate less than 60% of students.

Immersed in service learning methods, Freire learned alongside his students to rebuild cast-off computers, develop web sites, and acquire related computer programming skills. His students have become teaching resources to other students as well as to teachers in his school and members of the local community. The Urban Technology Project he created has been sizably expanded throughout the Philadelphia Public Schools by AmeriCorps members, trained college-age volunteers coordinated by the CNCS. Through its Learn and Serve America division — which supports service learning in schools, community-based organizations, and higher education — CNCS also gave Freire professional development funding as he created the Philadelphia Urban Technology Project. This support exemplifies the amplification that structural supports can bring to help service learning reach more young people.

## **Policy Resources**

### **United We Serve America**

Read about the United We Serve initiative, keep abreast of recent national service news, find and create service opportunities.

**[www.serve.gov](http://www.serve.gov)**

### **Learn and Serve America**

A branch of the Corporation for National and Community Service, Learn and Serve provides grants, technical assistance, and best-practices resources to support service learning programs in both K-12 schools and higher education.

**[www.learnandserve.gov](http://www.learnandserve.gov)**

### **Education Commission of the States (ECS)**

Through the National Center for Learning and Citizenship initiative, ECS advocates for service learning while providing policy briefs and research.

**[www.ecs.org](http://www.ecs.org)**

Freire's program, now organized in part through the University of Pennsylvania, has expanded to touch communities in India, Argentina, and Ecuador under the name *Puente*, Spanish for "bridge."

## CONCLUSION

Until now, school reform has focused heavily on structural changes in schools, including classroom design, school size, and whole-school reorganization in the form of charter schools. With few exceptions, even capable and well-prepared new teachers still enter these schools with largely traditional approaches to teaching. Yet with schools continuing to fail an unacceptable number of students, a fundamental shift in pedagogy is needed.

The 46-year-old Logan Square Neighborhood

***"Service learning engages young people in structured academic studies as well as out-of-school activities. When we do that, everyone wins."***

**—Dennis Van Roekel, president,  
National Education Association**

Association (LSNA) has used service learning in constructing a remarkable bridge joining local schools with the 84,000 largely Latino residents of Chicago's northwest side. Key is the two-way design that uses the teaching talents of parents, most of them immigrant mothers, many supported by AmeriCorps stipends. The results of offering service learning opportunities to parents? Standardized test scores for elementary students tripled, and playgrounds and school gardens were financed and built by parents. Parents and community members keep the lights on at LSNA community schools nearly 24/7 with English, computer, and employment-skill classes. Seeing their parents become engaged and empowered, students likewise flourish. Joanna Brown, LSNA's director of education organizing, speaks enthusiastically of the bridges service learning helped create in the community: "The Chicago school system didn't recognize that parents have a lot to offer; it takes a community organization to understand the value parents can bring to the classroom."

"The Neighborhood Association offers this beautiful model for immigrant families — as resources to themselves and their community," adds Juliet de Jesus Alejandra, a service learning coordinator who facilitates projects between LSNA and Kelvyn Park High Schools' Social Justice Academy.

Alejandra's programs at Kelvyn Park High School have brought student-led investment in problem

solving to address the roughly 50% dropout rate in Chicago. Jon Schmidt, service learning manager for the Chicago Public Schools, notes, "We see important student gains in academic success, civic engagement, and social and emotional development as a result of service learning." The relationship between the high school and neighborhood association helps address what teacher Maura Nugent calls "the biggest injustice": the absence of an informed student voice.

Teachers, students, and administrators in Philadelphia, Louisiana, Saint Paul, and Chicago have joined with schools and communities around the world to create a two-way learning bridge through service learning. As their stories are shared, their examples will be replicated in communities throughout the country. ■

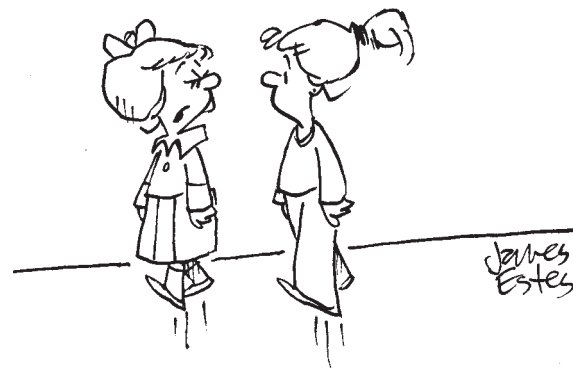
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← PRINCIPAL



*"I'll bat my eyelashes at bim. If that doesn't work, I'll swoon. That's a word I learned from my great gramma."*



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