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SERVICE LEARNING IN PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Service learning research shows that implementing it into public school curriculum can raise the quality of education for its students. After conducting a comprehensive search of all operable websites for service learning programs in each of the Pennsylvania Public Consolidated Area School Districts it was found that 340 school districts have service learning and 123 do not have service learning. Additionally, 30 school districts applied for and received 2009-2010 PA Learn and Serve grants.

The schools with service learning programs, on average, were found to have significantly higher median household incomes than school districts without service learning. Furthermore, school districts with service learning have lower percentages of students enrolled in free and reduced lunch programs than those districts without. Service learning districts also are larger and have less white students enrolled than those districts without. It was found that school districts that applied for the PA Learn and Serve grants to implement service learning in their districts reported numbers more similar to districts without service learning when analyzing median household incomes and students enrolled in free and reduced lunch programs. However, the size of the districts and the number of white students are more similar to districts with service learning.

The findings support the conclusion that wealthier school districts choose to finance service learning programs in their schools. This demonstrates that school districts in Pennsylvania do value the presence and benefits service learning has on their students. The poverty indicators of the grant applicant districts evidence the fact that poorer school districts do want to integrate service learning into their schools, but lack the necessary financial capacity to do so.

These findings lead to two policy recommendations for the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The first advises that The Department should create and maintain a database of school districts that offer service learning while also tracking the quality of the programs. The second insists that the Commonwealth increase the amount of grant money available to assist low-income school districts in starting and developing service learning into their schools so that equity is established for the Pennsylvania public school service learning opportunities.

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“When we stood at childhoods gate
Shapeless in the hands of fate
Though didst mold us Dear Old State
Dear Old State, Dear Old State”
-Fred Lewis Pattee Penn State Alma Mater

Introduction: Public Education in the United States

Welcome to the United States of America: where everyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and rise to the top of society. All you have to do is stay in school, study hard, and take advantage of the great equalizer the government provides for its youngest citizens: free, public education. With everyone on the same educational playing field, no one can every cry under-prepared or unfairly advantaged. In theory, a free and mandatory public education for all American children is a clear indication of a strong endorsement of providing resources and opportunities to all. The philosophy behind public education is well meaning and harnesses the power to unleash the intellectual capacity for problem solving in every single citizen.

This power is non-existent until the quality of public education is considered. While free and mandatory are two key factors behind the “great equalizer” claim, a third key factor, and arguably the most crucial of all, is continuously absent from the necessary components. The quality of the provided education is the keystone for transforming the idea of equality from a mythical theory to an actual reality. The tendency for high quality education to be sequestered to the richest school districts undermines the very philosophy public education was designed to uphold.

The United States federal government and state governments have taken steps in the past decade to legislate quality across all public school districts. The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 required all school districts across the nation to demonstrate proficient levels of knowledge in math, reading, and writing as tested by state standardized test. Test scores were to be separated by gender, race, and disability so that each category is held accountable separately. Additionally, districts became accountable for their attendance and graduation rates. Districts that fail to reach their annual yearly progress in all of the various

categories are subjected to punitive measures that range from loss of Title I funding to government takeover. Despite the attempt for quality control, the NCLB legislation left a firestorm in its wake over standards-based curriculum and negative sanctioning. It has certainly not produced or solidified a consensus on what a high quality education means, merely enforced a political one. The most clear cut evidence that not all American children are receiving a complete, high quality education lies within the dropout rates. In a 2009 article, CNN reported that nearly 6.2 million students dropped out of high school in 2007 (cnn.com). If the United States public education system cannot graduate 14% of its students under a highly contested set of standards but inconsistent standards, then the “great equalizer” theory is not currently in tact.

The United States can take steps to implement curricula standards that prove to keep students engage and raise the quality of education students receive. Service learning is a curriculum option that has not only piqued the interests of prominent educational policy researchers, but has also gained their respect. Service learning is not a new concept, with research dating back to the 1970s. Researchers demonstrate the viability of widespread implementation of service learning into academic settings to increase school completion and quality. Already, it is practiced to varying degrees of curriculum integration and quality in school districts across the country.

A question that remains to be answered, specifically for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, is which districts offer service learning and which do not. With 501 school districts and a wide array of different demographic and geographic settings, Pennsylvania can easily serve as a microcosmic model of understanding where service learning most easily takes root and where it could do the most good. Ultimately, what needs to be understood is why service learning is offered in some districts and not in others. What role does the financial

capabilities of a district play or is service learning available to students no matter their financial capacity? What types of school districts demonstrate an interest in acquiring service learning via grant applications? Does the amount of white students versus minority students differ in schools that offer service learning?

Literature Review: Service Learning through the Eyes of Academia

Paying for a Public Education

Michael Berkman and Eric Plutzer's *Ten Thousand Democracies* (2005) explains how the funding of public schools has evolved since the inception of public education. Chapter 2 in the book, titled "Financing Public Education" illustrates the different levels of contribution from the federal level, the state level, and the local level of government (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005, 20). The authors identify a 1971 California court ruling as being the marker of change in addressing funding inequities in the country (19). Prior to the school district consolidation movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, school districts relied mainly on whatever revenue they raised themselves (18,19).

The *Serano v. Priest* case was the first decision that "supported new legal arguments developed to address funding inequities" (19). This decision, followed by a wave of other similar decisions, led to an increase in the contribution states make to fund their districts' expenditures. A diagram indicates that as of 1995 Pennsylvania's median of percent of revenues received from local sources fell very close to the 50 percent mark, with a large distribution extending from about five percent to about ninety percent (23). This variation in state versus local funding matters a great deal when placed in the context of a state's funding regime. The authors explain, "At the state level, education spending is considered in context with other state priorities" (25). On the other hand, "Perhaps the most critical consequence of relying more upon state than local spending is that it disconnects education funding from the local property tax" (26). Conversely, those districts that rely mainly on local revenues are very dependent on the local property tax. Berkman and Plutzer point out that "Despite the inequities in spending that result in spending that result from reliance upon it, state and national courts have never found the property tax to be

an unacceptable mechanisms for raising education funds” (32). Additionally they point out that while differences among districts’ spending within any given state have lessened, differences do still exist and they are significant. One of the most noticeable differences is that within any given state, the districts that most rely on their own are the wealthiest districts.

A 2008 report by Carmen Arroyo for The Education Trust discusses how it is very common for the school districts with the greatest financial need to have the least amount of funding at their disposal. *The Funding Gap* reports, in a table titled “State and Local Funding in High and Low Poverty Districts, 2004-2005” that 18 states spent more per student in high poverty districts, with 15 states spending the same and 16 states spending less (Arroyo, *The Funding Gap*, 2). More specifically, in “Table 7: Funding Gaps by State, 2005” Pennsylvania’s gap between highest and lowest poverty districts in 2005 was -\$1,708; the negative number representing that fewer dollars were provided to high poverty school districts (9). Arroyo closes the report with a hopeful warning. He argues that states can close funding gaps, but interested parties need to dedicate themselves. He warns, “Funding gaps undermine equity in hundreds of different ways. Inequitable funding policies undercut the effectiveness of standards and accountability practices. Worse, they breed deep cynicism about whether we have anything but a superficial, rhetorical commitment to the education of all students” (8). Programs that do not contribute directly to testing standards these high poverty districts are subjected to are necessarily neglected because of budget constraints. Money matters supremely in terms of the quality and variety school districts can offer academically and co-curricularly.

On both the federal and state level, some recognition of this financial handicap is evident through the educational grant programs offered. PA Learn and Serve is a branch of the national organization “Learn and Serve America.” PA Learn and Serve, as a component of the National

and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, “provides federal funds through the Pennsylvania Department of Education to public schools for the development and/or expansion of local service learning programs. (*Taken from the 2008-2009 RFA, PDE, issued September, 2008*)” (pa-learnandserve.org). Pennsylvania attempts to address some of the inequities in service learning offerings by providing this PA Learn and Serve Grant program. Service learning programs, like many other educational programming, costs money. The Commonwealth recognizes that in order to encourage an equitable spread of service learning across the Commonwealth, it must offer financial aid so that districts can afford to implement it.

Those of the mindset that education should have an economic payoff for more than just the individual need only to look to the 2009 report by the Alliance for Excellent Education. This article articulates both the monetary value of proper and equal budgeting for public education and also what is economically at stake when proper and equal budgeting is ignored. The Alliance writes in *The High Cost of High School Dropouts* that annually the United States sees about 1.3 million high school dropouts (Alliance, *The High Cost of High School Dropouts*, 1). If just the dropouts from the class of 2009 finished school through graduation, they would have earned almost \$335 billion dollars in additional income over the course of their lifetime (1). The Alliance writes, “Dropouts represent a tremendous loss of human potential and productivity, and they significantly reduce the nation’s ability to compete in an increasingly global economy” (3). Our domestic economy suffers, as well. The United States would save between \$7.9 and 10.8 billion dollars annually if education offerings were improved for all those receiving food stamps, housing assistance, or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (4). If the United States graduated all of its students, it would save more than \$17 billion dollars expenditures for health care and Medicaid for the uninsured. When broken down by state, Alliance reports that

Pennsylvania dropouts alone would have seen an additional \$9,106,760.000 in additional lifetime income if those dropouts had graduated (5).

If our current standards based testing methods are unable to keep students in school long enough to graduate, then what can we do to alleviate the problem? Clearly, the public education system, as it operates currently, is not only failing the students but also failing our entire nation.

The dropout rates in as recent as 2009 are the cause of dramatic economic shortcomings that could be avoided if a better educational tool could be widely implemented and employed.

Service learning could be the tool that changes how teachers teach and how students learn, that is necessary to reform and improve our current educational system.

Service Learning:

In *Engaged for Success Service- Learning as a Tool for High School Dropout Prevention* published by Civic Enterprises in 2008, 81 percent of high school dropouts surveyed identified “opportunities for real world learning (internships, service learning, etc.) to make the classroom more relevant as something that would have improved their chances of staying in school

(Bridgeland, *Engaged for Success*, 6). The report defines service-learning as “an educational technique that incorporates community service into the academic curriculum” (7.) However, there is an important distinction between standard community and service-learning that makes it unique:

Service-learning differs from generic community service in that it has specific academic goals, is organized through schools, and involves reflection activities for the participants. Service- learning can take many forms, from individual projects in which students write children’s books about historical events and then read them to younger students, to group activities in which an entire class paints a mural depicting themes from their science class.

While only two percent of schools had service-learning programs in 1984, approximately 30 percent of schools have service-learning today. Officials estimate that about 4.7 million students are engaged in service-learning each year (7).

Additionally, service learning must tie into academic material taught in the classroom, with reflection activities enhancing both the service and the curriculum instruction when occurring before, during, and after the service (7). The report identifies another key component to high quality service learning as the youth voice and input over what type of service to perform (8). Students need to play a role in selecting service that is meaningful to them and service should take place over a concrete and extended block of time. Several weeks, or even several months, maximize the effect (9). In a table titled “Principles for Effective Practice K-12 Service-Learning” eight practices are identified: curricular integration, meaningful service, cognitively challenging reflection, progress monitoring, youth voice, duration and intensity, diversity, reciprocal relationships (9). The better a service-learning project and teachers are at incorporating these eight principles, the more powerful the positive effect of the service learning, including increased graduation rates.

Another survey conducting for the report indicates that the nature of the type of service-learning matters greatly for student engagement in the project, lending support to necessity of having students significantly involved in project selections (9). Ensuring this aspect is included in a service-learning curriculum provides and encourages student leadership in the process. The Civic Enterprises’ definition of high quality service learning model sets the standard of comparison for all of the service learning researched and discovered in the Pennsylvania Public School System.

The Wallace Foundation at Vanderbilt University gathers available evidence in their

article *Assessing Learning-Centered Leadership. Connections to Research, Professional Standards, and Current Research* and use it to suggest that schools cultivate particular in-school processes. These processes include setting rigorous academic standards, improving teacher quality, and creating a culture of collective responsibility (Goldring, 2007). The researchers claim that high achievement is dependent upon transformational and transformative leadership, particularly principal leadership. The article takes a key look at school achievement and graduation/dropout rates from an administrative perspective. One of the key components identified as a path to success is connection to external communities. Service learning is highlighted as an effective method to forming and maintaining these external community connections.

Benefits of Service-Learning

Why is service learning important? Many Scholars recognize service learning as a solution to high drop out rates. If so, and if the adoption of a service learning program is contingent on financial capacity, then it may be difficult for schools to adopt a relatively low cost option. If the benefits of service learning are clear, though, an argument can be made for increasing financial support for the development of service learning in districts that could not normally afford to offer it. In this section I explore the literature which links service learning with drop out rates, one of the most profound and visible benefits of service learning.

Robert Balfanz calls for a community-wide solution to the drop out problem in his 2007 article *What Your Community Can Do to End Its Drop-out Crisis: Learnings from Research and Practice*. Though Balfanz does not explicitly use the term “service-learning,” the description he gives of what is critical to improving graduation rates maps almost perfectly to what service-learning curricula seek to provide in communities:

Superintendents and principals come and go with such frequency and/or are distracted with the crisis of the year that there is no consistent oversight and management of the long-term action needed to end the dropout crisis. A strategic plan needs to be formulated at the community level, and then the permanent institutions of the community-its businesses, institutions of higher learning, civic groups, advocacy groups, police, hospitals, social service providers, and neighborhood organizations- need to take ownership of it (Balfanz, 2007, 21).

Balfanz is not the only one who points to service-learning goals as a solution to America's educational flaws. In addressing the achievement gaps present in the public education system, Peter Scales and a team of authors present their findings about service-learning's contributions to reducing these gaps. The report titled *Reducing Academic Achievement Gaps: The Role of Community Service and Service-Learning* measure academic achievement mainly through the use of attendance and engagement. The authors use three large, diverse data sets to study the relationships. Their results found that principals in high-poverty urban, majority non-white high schools were most likely to judge service learning and community service positively when looking at student attendance, engagement, and academic achievement. Additionally, the students who participated in service learning programs from these types of schools identified their own improvements in academic factors, and the students from low socio-economic statuses who participated scored better in most measures of academic achievement than their peers who did not participate in a service-learning program. This report makes a highly persuasive case for the creation of service learning programs in underprivileged schools as it attests to their benefits

and achievements. Service learning programs can be, arguably, most beneficial in these high poverty areas where they are most rare

Hypotheses and Predictions

Service learning programs cost money to implement and instruct at the level of quality necessary to yield positive benefits. Therefore, a school district's ability to provide service learning lies primarily with its ability to finance it. The value a school district places in service learning is not accurately reflected by their choice to offer it or not, because many school districts may not have the choice at all. A poor school district may wholeheartedly believe that service learning curricula would incite a surge in graduation rates and attendance numbers, but because there is so much financial strain they cannot afford to try such a program.

Wealthy school districts have an array of choices. Their opting to offer service learning indicates they place a higher value on its benefits than the advertised benefits of any other curriculum or instruction practice they could have instead financed. If wealthier school districts in Pennsylvania are offering service learning as part of their curricula, it evidences the claim that school districts recognize the benefits service learning offers because they are opting to use their money to offer it.

The key to understanding whether or not poorer districts want to offer service learning is to look at the type of schools districts applying for grants to do so. If the school districts that apply for PA Learn and Serve grants are poorer, then there is a basis for the claim that Pennsylvania has a responsibility to make service learning a more equitable reality across all of its districts. The only way it can do this under the current educational laws is to provide more grant and funding support for it.

I expect to find that wealthier school districts in Pennsylvania do have service learning in their schools. I also expect that the poorer districts will not offer service learning. However, I predict that poorer districts do not offer service learning not because they do not want to or do

not perceive there will be benefits for their students; rather, because they simply cannot afford to do so. The type of school districts that are applying for the PA Learn and Serve grants, I expect, will support this claim. The applicant schools will be poorer districts that need the financial support from the state to offer service learning.

In order to investigate these claims, it will be necessary to identify which of the 501 Pennsylvania school districts offer service learning, which do not, and which are grant applicants or recipients. The financial capabilities of these three categories of school districts need to be assessed.

If these predictions are supported by the data, then there is a solid basis for urging Pennsylvania to make a substantial research and financial commitment to service learning, particularly to making it available to poor school districts and then measuring the benefits it yields.

The Data and Procedures

Testing the hypotheses require identifying which Pennsylvania school districts offer service learning independent of the state, which offer service learning because they received a 2009-2010 service learning grant, and which do not offer any service learning. Once all 501 districts are separated into one of these three categories, it is necessary to obtain information about their financial capabilities to determine which are wealthier and which are poorer. Additionally, data that could inform the demographic makeup of a district could be helpful in understanding the type of district that fell into each of the three categories. School district policies are very much influenced by the type of students it is educating. A school district in inner city Philadelphia is inevitably serving a very different type of student than a school district in rural central Pennsylvania. Distinguishing in my research the districts in this geographic manner is key to capturing that aspect of the landscape of Pennsylvania public schools.

The dependent variables were very easy to identify. The three categories of schools determined earlier would serve as the three dependent variables: service learning districts, grant districts, and no service learning districts. The classification of the dependent variables was determined by a website search of each school district. Using the Pennsylvania Department of Education's database of names and addresses for school districts, I compiled the URLs for each of the 501 school districts that host a functioning website (edna.ed.state.pa.us). I then conducted a comprehensive Google search of each website. The Google website search function: ["service learning" site:url] provided me with a list of all links to a districts website that contained the phrase service learning .Because the search terms "service learning" and "service-learning" yielded the same results in test cases, I only searched "service learning" for each district. If the

search yielded searchable links, I used the Civic Enterprises definition of high quality service learning to determine whether or not that district would be counted as a service learning district. All service learning districts were coded a 1 and the no service learning districts were coded a 0.

The 2009-2010 PA Learn and Serve grant recipient districts were determined with the help of Mr. David Tandberg and Mr. Garry Hutchinson from the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Mr. Tandberg, and alumnus of the Penn State Political Science Department, put me in contact with Mr. Hutchinson, a Program Officer for PA Learn and Serve, who graciously shared with me the recipient school districts for 09-10. These schools were automatically put into the grant school district category.

The independent variables were selected based on their ability to represent the demographic and geographic make up of each school district. The independent variables I selected are: the size of the school district measured by the number of enrolled students, the locale of the school district, the amount of students receiving free or reduced lunches, the median family household income and the number of white students in the district. I used the Common Core of Data to fill in the data for each of the independent variables (nces.ed.gov). I collected the data for each consolidated area school district in Pennsylvania.

The poverty indicators are represented by the Median Household Income according to the 2000 census and the 2008 number of students enrolled in free and reduced lunch programs. 2008 is the most recent data available on the Common Core of Data. I converted the raw number of students enrolled in lunch programs into a percentage for each of the three dependent variables.' totals. I found the total number of white students for each district and converted that raw number for each dependent variable's total into a percentage. I also used the Common Core of Data to collect information on the locale classifications, according to National Center for Education

Statistics' classifying standards. All raw numbers converted to percentages were done so for the sake of calculation and comparison.

Prior to establishing the website search as the method for determining which districts fell into which of the dependent variable categories, two other methods were attempted and failed.

Before developing any method, I contacted the Department of Education to explore what type of information they had about the school districts that offered service learning. The Department explained that they did not have comprehensive records of this information. I then set to developing a method of gathering this information independently.

In the Fall of 2009, Dr. Michael Berkman, Associate Professor of Political Science at the Pennsylvania State University, and I put together a short questionnaire. (Appendix I). Designed to elicit information about which districts offered service learning and the structure of service learning they offered, it was emailed to each superintendent in the Commonwealth whose email address was listed on their website. The website URLs were retrieved from the Pennsylvania Department of Education Names and Address' website (www.edna.ed.state.pa.us). Because I received only a few completed questionnaires, a second method was developed.

The new attempt to identify the dependent variables was designed to be a more personal approach. Dr. Berkman and I agreed to sample fifty districts in Pennsylvania by placing phone calls directly to their central administration offices. I randomized the 501 school districts using Microsoft Excel and then counted down the list, calling every tenth school. This method, while producing some fruitful conversations with a few district administrators, ultimately proved unsuccessful. Many of the support staff forwarded me to voicemails, very few of which were returned, or gave me email addresses where I could send the survey. Very few emails were returned. Some districts could not identify the proper administrators to whom they should refer

me. The very few telephone conversations I did conduct could not properly follow the survey questions because the administrators with whom I spoke rarely had an understanding of what I meant by service learning.

Findings in the Data

Before examining the findings, I would like to review the hypotheses. My expectation is that service learning is less likely to be found in school districts with fewer monetary resources because they cannot afford to offer it. I also expect to find that wealthier districts do offer service learning both because not just because they afford it, but because there is a value in providing it. I believe that low income districts are the schools that stand to gain the most drastic measurable benefits from service learning in their schools and would offer it if they could afford to do so. I expect that evidence for this will be found in the demographics of the districts that apply for PA Learn and Serve grants.

The data provides rich information about all of the hypotheses. The table below summarizes the means and medians for each of the three dependent variables: service learning schools, grant schools, and no service learning schools.

Type of School		TOTAL STUDENTS (SCHOOL)	Median Family Income (Census)	FREE AND REDUCED LUNCH (SCHOOL)	Free Lunch per Student	WHITE, NON-HISPANIC STUDENTS (SCHOOL)	percent white
No service learning, no grant (340)	Mean	2468.5	46717.0	684.6	0.31	2160.7	90.7
	Median	1980.0	43359.5	525.0	0.31	1794.0	
Grant applicant, previous status unknown (30)	Mean	4558.3	46119.6	2108.7	0.38	2633.9	76.1
	Median	3027.0	42050.0	712.0	0.35	2027.0	
Service learning, no 2009-2010 grant application (123)	Mean	5880.2	55436.1	2084.7	0.26	3722.3	83.7
	Median	3654.0	51010.5	651.0	0.23	3068.5	

Figure 1: Table of Calculated Findings

Turning first to the numbers that speak to the diversity of each type of school, the percentage of white students in each type of school presents the opposite of what I predicted. The schools with no service learning and no grant applications are also the least diverse schools, with 90.7% of enrolled students reported as white. Service learning schools who did not apply for a 2009-2010 grant report 83.7% of their student population as white. The most diverse student population lies with 2009-2010 grant applicant school districts, with a 76.1% of their students being white. While the percentages are quite different in each category, it is worth noting that the grant applicant districts are closer in diversity percentages to the districts that offer service learning.

These percentages, alone, indicate that the schools without service learning are actually less diverse than those who have it. Interestingly, though, the grant applicant school types percentages indicate they have the most diverse student bodies. When examining the other independent variables surrounding grant applicant schools, the numbers come in far more similar to those schools without service learning than those with service learning. Why then are the percentages of white students so different?

When the diversity numbers are examined in the context of the locale's each of the three types of schools holds, the percentages of white students start are informed by another piece of the picture. The Common Core Data assigns four different type of locales to school districts: city, suburb, town, and rural (nces.ed.gov/ccd). Each of these categories is than split into more detailed specifications. For example, a suburb can be classified as large, mid-size, or small. A town or rural locale can be classified as fringe, distant, or remote. The charts below illustrate the city/suburb/town/rural proportions of each school type.

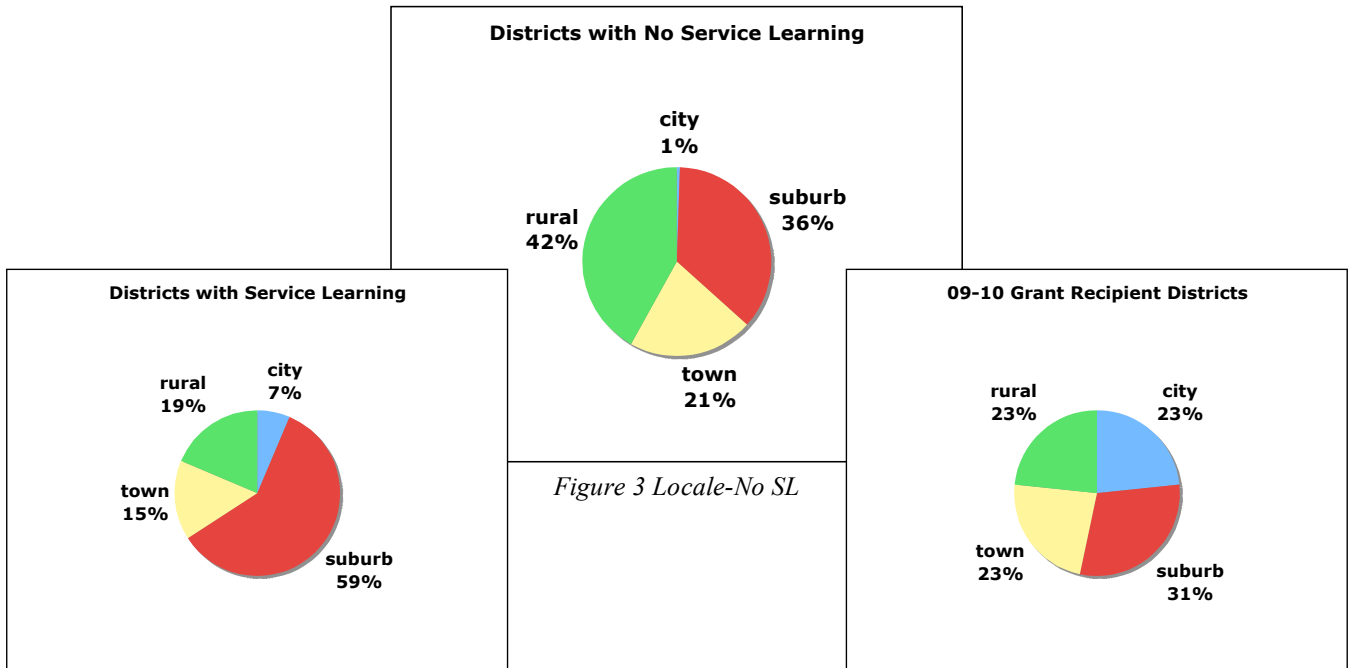


Figure 3 Locale-No SL

Figure 2 Locale-SL

Figure 4 Locale-Grants

Seeing the locale distributed among the four classifications offers an explanation as to why the percentage white is so high in districts with no service learning. Only one percent of school districts in Pennsylvania that do not have service learning are categorized as city schools, where town and rural schools are account for 63% of the districts in that category. This high percentage of rural and town school districts can account for the high percentage of white students in the districts with no service learning. Rural school districts and small town school districts tend to have wider achievement gaps but very little diversity, especially in Pennsylvania. Conversely, 59% of the school districts with service learning are suburban schools, which are traditionally in Pennsylvania are more affluent with smaller achievement gaps. This distribution of district locale classification does offer a valid explanation as to why the percentage white numbers came out opposite of the way in which I originally hypothesizes. The percentages are

not necessarily an indicator of high quality education or achievement; rather the particular geographic and demographic situation in Pennsylvania.

Figure 4 offers an interesting perspective on the locales of schools that apply for grants to bring service learning into their districts. There is a perfectly even distribution between city schools, rural schools, and town schools, with an only slightly higher percentage of suburban schools applying. This indicates that all school districts placed in all four locale classifications demonstrate a value in putting forth the effort to apply for grant money that will allow them to provide service learning to their students. This value is not heavily biased toward a certain locale; it is consistent throughout the four classifications.

The two variables that support the hypothesis in a strong manner are the median household income and the percentage of students on a reduced or free lunch program. Turning first to the percentage of students receiving reduced or free lunch, an indicator of the presence of poverty in the school district, supports the prediction that service learning would be more prevalent in more affluent districts. Figure 5 (below) lays out the means and medians of the percentages of students receiving reduced and free lunch in all three school district types. “No SL” indicates districts with no service learning, “Grant” indicates those districts that received 09-10 grants, and “SL” indicates those districts that do offer service learning. Both the mean and the median percentages of these students are higher in school districts without service learning than those districts with service learning. This occurs with both the mean and the median. With a mean and median of .31, districts without service learning enroll more students in reduced and free lunch programs than districts with service learning, that report percentages of .26 and .23, respectively for the mean and median. Another interesting observation to be garnered from this chart is where the grant applicant schools fall on the spectrum. In the case of both the mean and

the median, the grant recipient schools have higher percentages of students receiving reduced or free lunches. The districts that applied for and received PA Learn and Serve grants for the 2009-2010 academic year demonstrate the highest poverty levels of all three categories studied. While the grant districts' percentages exceeded both of the other school types considerably, they still were close to the no service learning districts when laid out in the spectrum of all three categories. This observation gives additional credence to two different claims. The first is that the school districts with less capacity do not have service learning. The second is that school districts, even higher poverty districts, place merit in service learning and are applying for financial assistance to integrate it into their school districts.

Figure 5: Median Household Income Graph

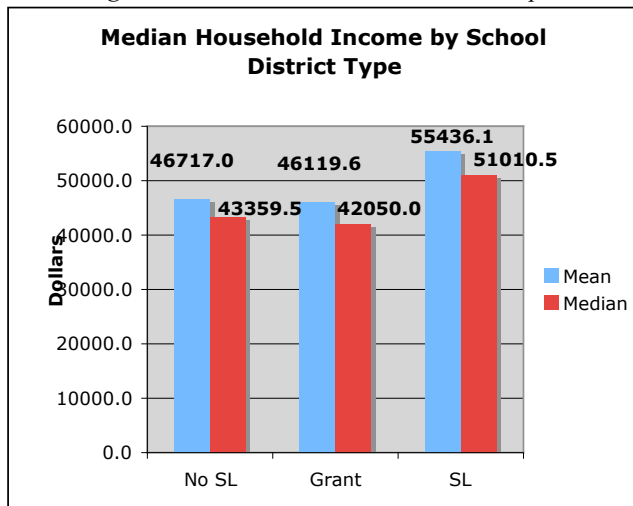
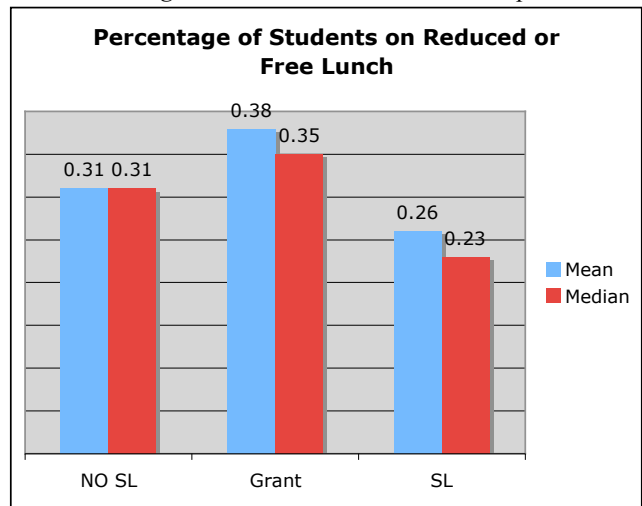


Figure 6: Reduced/Free Lunch Graph



The most convincing evidence the data presents in support of the hypothesis is the comparison of the median household income between the three types of school districts. Figure 6 (above) graphically displays the mean and median of the median household income for each type of school district. A few different comparisons can be drawn from these numbers. For one, the average median household income is \$8,719.10 less in districts that do not offer service learning in their schools. Again, the poorer schools are the ones where service learning is absent. There is

a \$7,651 difference between the medians of the median household incomes for service learning districts versus non-service learning districts. No matter how one chooses to look at it, service learning exists in Pennsylvania school districts with more money. Once again, the grant recipient districts assist in painting a more detailed scene of service learning in the Commonwealth. The median and mean median household income numbers for the grant schools are extremely similar to the no service learning school district numbers, only differing by \$1,309 and \$597.40 respectively. As was the case with the reduced/free lunch percentages, the grant applicant schools sport numbers that are more similar to those of the districts with no service learning as opposed to those districts that do offer it. Once again, this indicates that poorer districts are actively demonstrating a desire to implement service learning in their schools by applying for grant money that would allow them to do so.

The last independent variable compared in the data table presented in Figure 1 is the number of students in each type of school. The smallest districts are the districts that do not offer service learning programs. The districts with the most amount of students, in both the case of the mean and the median, are the school districts that offer service learning programs. In this instance, the grant applicant schools' student numbers fall closer to those districts that do offer service learning as opposed to those that do not. The numbers are demonstrated in the graph, Figure 7, constructed to illustrate the values.

Figure 7: Student Enrollment Graph

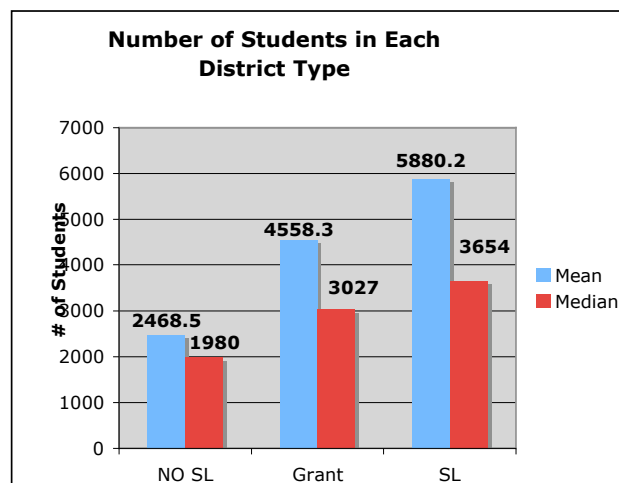


Figure 7 indicates that service learning districts have significantly more students, on average, than districts with no service learning. There is a 3,411.7 student difference. The difference between the number of students attending service learning schools and attending grant applicant schools is far less stark with an average difference of only 1,321.9 students. The poorer schools applying for grants are not only geographically disperse across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, but also are larger and more diverse

What do these number say about the perceived merit of inserting service learning programs into Pennsylvania public schools? The fact that grant applicant school districts exist at all signal a very explicit desire by those districts to bring service learning into their schools. Comparing the independent variables of the grant schools with the independent variables of the other two categories also indicate what type of school districts are seeking out the financial assistance to fund the service learning. While examining each of the independent variables earlier, the data identified two instances where grant schools are more similar to schools that have service learning and two instances where grant schools are more similar to schools that have service learning. The table (below) consolidates where these similarities and differences exist, marking biggest differences with a “-“ and the biggest similarities with a ”+”.

Figure 8: Variable Comparisons

Independent Variable	Service Learning Districts	No Service Learning Districts
Number of Students	+	-
Percentage White	+	-
Free/Reduced Lunches	-	+
Median Family Income	-	+

It’s evident in figure 8 that where grant applicant schools, the schools actively showing a desire to provide service learning in its schools, is more aligned with districts void of service learning when it comes to poverty indicators. However, when it comes to diversity and size indicators, the

grant districts align more closely with schools that already offer service learning programs.

These similarities and differences indicate that districts that do not offer service learning are most likely not doing so out of constraints from financial capacity, as opposed to a lack of desire for or value of service learning. School district administrators recognize that there is an educational benefit to using service learning in public school curricula. The fact that districts, by all applicable variables, that do not have the money to develop these programs on their own are seeking the out the funds to make service learning a reality speaks to its desirability among all schools, not just the affluent. Additionally, the first hypothesis I posed is also supported by the data collected from all three school types. The richer schools have service learning, while the poorer students do not. Though the diversity piece of the hypothesis is not supported by the data, the locale classifications and proportions within each school type feasibly explain the phenomenon for the districts without service learning having less diverse student populations.

Conclusion: Policy Recommendation

Nature of the Situation:

The Pennsylvania Department of Education is clear: they do not have any comprehensive dataset or record of which public school districts offer service learning on which do not. Furthermore, they have no comprehensive record of the types of service learning that are offered and if they meet the standard necessary to be academically sound and elicit the benefits of which the literature proved it capable.

The historical problem of insufficient funding and unequal funding among school districts within a state or Commonwealth is one that goes largely ignored. Districts, struggling to meet rigid standardized testing scores with insufficient educational tools and resources have a more difficult time than ever trying to reach and engage their students, especially in the lowest achieving districts. Those districts that are achieving at the lowest levels are forced to reallocate their budget to finance standardized testing remediation so they can avoid NCLB's punitive sanctions. These schools are forced to cut already existing fringe programs, including classes in the arts and physical education, never mind add substantive programs like service learning. The dropout rate, fueled by a failure to engage and connect to students with this test-based lesson planning, is a growing concern that is plaguing not only the lives of the students the system fails to educate, but also the United States' domestic economy and our reputation on a global scale. Service learning presents itself as an instructional and educational method has been identified as capturing students of all ages' attention, engaging them, encouraging them to remain in school, and providing them with an entirely higher quality of education than before. However, it becomes a competing interest for already strained resources. Successful completion of service learning does not help your district meet the legal annual yearly progress levels, so it sits

untouched with its potential untapped year after year simply because your district cannot afford to explore it.

More affluent school districts having no problem preparing and passing their students through standardized testing. These already high achieving districts are not only providing these service learning opportunities to their students, but also sometimes mandating them. The students in poorer districts who fail to graduate their students have no such access to the service learning programs that would most certainly change their attitude and achievement levels in the educational realm.

This is the picture the data paints about the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's public school system paints when examined for its instances of service learning. Those districts that are most in need of the benefits service learning offers cannot reach them because money matters in Pennsylvania's public education system.

A lack of support from the state to value service learning programs enough to track them, combined with a lack of financial resources, deepens the divide between rich and poor in the public education system. This is an unacceptable reality in Pennsylvania. Steps must immediately be taken to remedy the situation and transform service learning into an opportunity for all school districts to offer their students.

Course of Action:

The data shows that the schools that can afford service learning offer it to students; however, it also shows something else. If funding is available specifically to start up service learning programs or to integrate service learning into curriculum, poorer and more diverse schools show a great interest in applying for those funds. Pennsylvania schools are actively demonstrating a desire to utilize service learning in their classrooms.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education should take two specific steps to increase the accessibility of service learning to all school districts, regardless of demographic or financial restrictions on a district.

1. The Department should create complete and accurate database of Pennsylvania public school district that offer service learning in the classroom. This database should include whether or not the service learning experience is mandatory, what ages and grade levels the projects are offered, and what the projects offered entail. Additionally, the database must maintain record of attendance rates, graduation rates, and standardized test scores for any and all students participating in the service learning so that measurable study of the benefits are readily available.

2. The Pennsylvania Department of Education must increase grant money and grant application education by 25% of both current availabilities by the end of 2011. The Department has a responsibility to educate their school districts that such grants and opportunities exist and must make the process comprehensible so any school district feels capable and comfortable applying for funding. Additionally, by committing more money from the Commonwealth, instead of relying solely on federal funding, the PA Department of Education is sending a clear signal of its commitment and belief in the value of service learning. It communicates that service learning is a program that should be accessible to all districts and that all districts, despite restrictions, should feel encouraged to explore the benefits service learning could bring to their districts, and most importantly, their students.

APPENDIX A

Dear *Superintendent* :

My name is Samantha Miller and I am a senior honors student studying political science at the Pennsylvania State University at University Park. Every honors student has the opportunity to write a thesis in their field and I have chosen to write mine about service learning programs in grade levels K-12 in Pennsylvania public schools.

In order to make my research as comprehensive as possible, I am reaching out to each school district to learn first hand about the service learning programs your district may include into it's curriculum. I realize that "service learning" is a very broad term; specifically, I am curious about programs that merge classroom learning and practical experience in a manner where a clear academic center is present and mixed with hands on opportunities to experience it's relevance in the world as it functions.

If it wouldn't take too much of your time, I would greatly appreciate your response to a few questions about any such service learning programs in your district. If you have any questions or reservations please do not hesitate to contact me at sem5118@psu.edu or my thesis advisor Dr. Michael Berkman at mbb1@psu.edu.

Thank you so much for your time and assistance, I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Samantha E. Miller

1. Do you integrate service learning into your curriculum? If so, at what grade levels (K-12) do you offer service-learning programs as part of your curriculum?
2. Are these projects/opportunities required for all students? Are they required for a specific population of students?
3. Over what period of time do these service learning projects/programs extend? How long do they take to complete both (both in and outside of the classroom)?
- 4.) Do you wish to offer any additional comments about the make-up of your service learning programs or anything related to service learning curriculums?

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