



# TALK IT UP

## ADVOCATING FOR SERVICE-LEARNING

EDITION TWO

## CREATING A LIFELINE FOR SERVICE-LEARNING IN A BUDGET STORM

By Karen Horne

Like most states, South Carolina is facing a difficult financial period. Teachers and administrators may be furloughed because of our state budget deficit. While schools are facing increased accountability for student achievement, per-pupil spending has been cut by 13%. Schools have absorbed five mid-year budget cuts since May 2001. One teacher association has asked, “How can you expect a twenty-first century education at 1995 funding levels?”

This is not the best environment for strengthening schools. Yet, service-learning is thriving in South Carolina. Service-learning leaders have been successful in maintaining support because we have established mutually beneficial relationships within the South Carolina Department of Education, education constituency groups, the Governor’s Council on Beautification and Litter, and the General Assembly. These connections, complemented by aligning service-learning with policymakers’ priorities, have helped us weather this budget storm.

We laid the groundwork to advance service-learning in South Carolina before the current budget crisis began, but the strategies we used can be initiated now in any state. I would describe these strategies as follows.

- **Build cross-department relationships.** We have built alliances with other offices within the Department of Education, including Safe and Drug Free Schools, Teacher Quality, School Quality, Public Information, and Character Education. We have provided supports, such as presentations and exhibits, to meet other departments’ goals. For example, we co-authored a publication about the ties between service-learning and character education.
- **Capitalize on core educational initiatives.** We understood that service-learning could not survive or grow without connections to core educational policies. School

accountability is a good example of how we have integrated service-learning into wider education initiatives. Like many other states, South Carolina issues report cards for all of its schools based on student performance on standardized tests. The state accountability law created “teacher specialists on site,” identifying master teachers to teach in under-performing schools and giving these educators a substantial salary increase. We saw this program as a perfect way to integrate service-learning into the Department of Education’s professional development efforts. Now we will work with the Office of School Quality to offer these teacher specialists training in service-learning as an important pedagogy for raising student achievement.

- **Seek support from education leaders.** Our state superintendent, Inez Tenenbaum, has been pleased that service-learning advocates worked together with other offices and programs within the Department of Education. As a result, we have been able to further embed service-learning into her priorities. The superintendent has included us in key initiatives, like the “No Child Left Behind” legislation, by asking that funding for community service under Title IV go to support service-learning. We have also had bipartisan encouragement and support from our Governors and Members of the General Assembly.
- **Work with important stakeholder networks.** We have been very deliberate about including our state teacher, school board, and school administrator associations as our service-learning partners. These relationships have broadened our reach without our spending more money. The South Carolina Association of School Administrators decided after the 1997 Presidents’ Summit for America’s Future to sponsor a program that encouraged schools to

adopt the Summit’s “five promises” for healthy, engaged young people. This partnership has become a major vehicle for spreading service-learning to our schools. A majority of South Carolina’s 1,100 schools have become “Schools of Promise,” and “Flagship Schools” have made an even larger commitment. More than half of the Flagship Schools use service-learning to fulfill their pledge—and not all these schools receive funding through our Learn and Serve America grant. We have supported districts turning community service projects, such as oral histories with elderly war veterans, into service-learning opportunities. We have also sent a staff member to every district that has shown an interest in service-learning, providing orientation and professional development sessions.

*We have been successful in maintaining support for service-learning because we have established mutually beneficial relationships within the Department of Education, education constituency groups, the governor’s office, and the General Assembly.*

- **Use available service-learning materials.** In all our work, we have used free national materials. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation has sponsored many of the resources we find most helpful. We always use copies of the National Commission on Service-Learning’s final report, *Learning In Deed: The Power of Service-Learning for American Schools* and the videos accompanying the report. People are impressed that former U.S. Senator John Glenn promotes service-learning.

From our experience here in South Carolina, I recommend that service-learning advocates consider our strategies, which I will summarize as three recommendations:

**1 Take time to make friends.** Reach out to potential allies. Meetings do not have to be expensive. Our first interdepartmental meetings involved brainstorming over inexpensive refreshments. If it is difficult to meet, then send an email or write a letter! Some of our strongest relationships have begun from informal contact.

**2 Share your resources.** Given the low level of service-learning funding, this suggestion might seem counter-intuitive. But we have found that using our resources for others’ benefit gives us credibility and support. Because policymakers have seen our efforts as reinforcing their goals, we have been able to stave off a loss of funding for service-learning, which sometimes happens in a crisis. Contribute to others’ conferences, workshops, and publications by tying service-learning to pertinent educational goals.

**3 Make the most of what you have.** Provide the non-financial resources that schools and districts need to start up service-learning. Through our workshops around the state, a well-respected group of superintendents and principals share the value of service-learning with their peers. This past year, South Carolina’s superintendent and the national secondary school principal of the year were among our spokespeople for service-learning. Students have also been persuasive advocates.

The key to our success in South Carolina has been establishing relationships of good will that are a lifeline, through good and bad budgets.

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To order the National Commission on Service-Learning’s final report, *Learning In Deed: The Power of Service-Learning in American Schools* or the associated videos, call 1-800-819-9997 or email [WKKFORD@iserv.net](mailto:WKKFORD@iserv.net).