

Service Learning and Education Policy: Innovation and Reform for Today's Classroom

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The state of public education in America has been a consistent point of contention in recent decades. Policymakers, educators, and parents have all addressed the need for reform, but positive, tangible change has proved minimal. This past semester, while enrolled in a Marketing and Public Policy class at The College of New Jersey, I was able to explore the educational issues and policy implications surrounding the Trenton School District in Trenton, New Jersey. The class required each student to choose a subject area, and then research and participate in community engaged learning, ultimately resulting in a policy report that could be evaluated for discussion to aid the Trenton area.

The foundations of the class challenged me to assess how elements of marketing, psychology, and government inform public policy decisions. Through my service learning, I learned more about the role that the government, non-governmental organizations, and private organizations play in improving Trenton's public school system.

Through my own research, and in conjunction with the Trenton Prevention Policy Board and The College of New Jersey's Bonner Institute for Civic and Community Engagement, I engaged in multiple service trips and activities addressing the educational systems and educational attainment of students and schools in Trenton.

The Trenton Prevention Policy Board (TPPB) is a grassroots effort that aims to reduce juvenile delinquency and promote positive youth development in the city of Trenton. The board consists of local stakeholders gathering together to share their knowledge about policies, programs, services, and practices so they can make informed recommendations to municipal, county, and state officials. TPPB has six subcommittees (health, juvenile delinquency, education, mentoring, domestic violence, and unemployment), and throughout the semester I attended meetings and worked directly with the education subcommittee.

My work with TPPB was facilitated by the Bonner Institute for Civic and Community Engagement. TCNJ's Bonner Institute aims to improve and advance the local community through inducing systematic change. Working with partners throughout the Trenton community, the Bonner Institute addresses many issues including poverty, homelessness, hunger, education, environmental needs, juvenile justice, health, and immigration. My service trips were orchestrated through the Bonner Institute.

My service learning experience substantially enhanced my understanding of and insight into educational practices and policies. Tutoring in classrooms at Hedgepeth Williams Middle School in Trenton highlighted the lack of available resources and failure of current education policies; it became clear to me that new reforms could and should be enacted in order to revive the state of education and to provide a better future for today's students, especially students in urban districts with demographics similar to Trenton.

My parents' occupations in New Jersey public high schools, my mother as a social worker and my father as an English teacher, meant I was raised in an environment salient to various educational issues and controversies; however, my working in a classroom fostered a personal connection with today's education system.

The classroom service experience enriched my understanding of the daily issues and constant roadblocks that parents, teachers, students, and administrators face, especially in an urban district. Service learning transformed an abstract concept into something tangible; I could see the frustrations of students and teachers and came to understand their roots. These roots stem from a lack of resources, curriculums inadequate for the student body demographics, and staff under-qualified to meet the variety of needs that must be addressed in Trenton, where students are at a higher risk of witnessing domestic violence or alcohol abuse at home, more likely to have an incarcerated parent than students in other districts, and waver close to or under the poverty line. After my experience, I now more firmly believe that the financial support needed to effectively equip a classroom, the counselor support staff needed to properly address student needs, and the infrastructure support needed to effectively run a school must be altered in order to create the best environment possible for students.

Only once the proper resources are present can significant learning take place. Fostering the most sustainable educational foundation begins within the classroom, and student development can easily become stunted in solely assessment-focused or disengaged learning environments. While in the classroom, I found that many students had little to no attachment to the material and therefore experienced extreme difficulty sustaining interest in it. The key to developing this love of learning is to cultivate a positive relationship with the tools needed to learn, to spark a yearning for further knowledge. Over-assessment and frustration stemming from the wrong or inadequate presentation of the materials or resources can easily dull this desire in students.

The classrooms where I volunteered provided a plethora of insight into the inner-workings of a school and classroom. I learned that there cannot be a one-size-fits-all formula for each student, each classroom, each district, or each state. The standardized method of teaching students one-dimensional topics worked well in the 19th century when most students were going into industrialized jobs; however, in today's world, this one-size-fits-all strategy will not suffice. Emphasis should be placed on schools that teach 21st century skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. In the implementation of recent reforms, many policymakers and administrators have overlooked the importance of innovative thinking, especially when classrooms are faced with varying levels of resources and support.

My community-based research taught me the necessity of policymakers' understanding of and involvement with the inner-workings of classrooms, and that the unity between parents, teachers, administrators, government officials, and policymakers is crucial for any school policy, district curriculum, or classroom environment to thrive. With such diverse demographics and socio-economic classes present across the state of New Jersey, government officials, administrators, and policymakers must increase their familiarity with the resources and needs of the schools and districts they regulate. This will allow for the most personalized and effective learning environment.

Ultimately, my service learning experience granted me new insight into the state of education today. Education is caught in a crossfire between standards and other methods of teaching. The question remains how these two methods of teaching, whether taught exclusively or together, can yield the most dynamic classroom environments and produce motivated students. The engagement and sense of achievement students experience greatly depend on the resources and staff available to students, parents, and teachers; policymakers must be aware of possible resource limitations within the districts they oversee.

In school districts like Trenton, where a large portion of the student body cannot meet district or state standards, further leaving students, parents, and teachers discouraged, I think policymakers and administrators can and should explore other options that may be more effective for districts where a discrepancy between educational potential and attainment exists.

The report I wrote after my experiences and research, “A Personalized Learning Framework: Innovation and Reform for Today’s Classroom,” addressed three main educational innovations that stress the diversity among classrooms and between districts, and emphasized the tools needed to create a vibrant and engaging learning environment for every student. These innovations fall under the practice of a personalized learning framework. Personalized learning combats the increase of mandated standardized testing as it directly involves the students and teachers, working together to create a dynamic and rewarding learning environment.

Personalized learning is an approach that is individualized by design and thus varies from person to person. It grants students the freedom to explore their interests at a deeper level academically, providing personal support and attention. A personalized framework, whether implemented through small learning communities, blended learning, digital learning, or a pyramid of intervention approach, offers potential for tangible education reform.

With both parents employed in New Jersey public schools, I have always been conscious and attuned to the struggles between government, teacher liberty and accountability, curriculums, administrators, and policies, but my service learning experience instilled in me a deeper connection to the need for efficient and effective education for all: to vocalize the needs of parents, teachers, and administrators in order to create the most dynamic and flourishing learning environment for students. Enacting reformative change will prove challenging, but change is vital to the reinvigoration of the education system within Trenton, within New Jersey, and within the entire United States.

*“Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving
your community and world better than you found it.”*

– Marian Wright Edelman

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