

Community Service and Service Learning in Canada: A Profile of Programming Across the Country

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Over the past two decades, support has grown for the idea that schools should play a more active role in promoting the civic development of young people. A substantial body of literature has documented the benefits to be had from introducing school-based initiatives such as community service and service learning programs (Billig, 2004). Many school jurisdictions in both the developed and developing worlds have responded by introducing a wide variety of high school programs involving some combination of community service and service learning. In the United States, as of 2004, fully 83% of public high schools were offering community service programs of one kind or another, and 44% of all schools were mounting service learning programs (Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2004). As Arenas, Bosworth, and Kwandayi (2006) demonstrate, this is truly a global trend. There are similar initiatives in all of the developed countries, and school-related civic engagement programs are also found in developing countries such as Botswana, Nigeria, Columbia, Trinidad and Tobago, China, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Cuba.

It is not clear how Canadian school programming on this front compares to that

elsewhere. This is partly because responsibility for education in Canada rests with the ten provinces and three territories, producing thirteen distinct program regimes. And, unlike the U.S. where there have been several nation-wide school-based initiatives such as *Learn and Serve America* and the *Corporation for National and Community Service*, there has been no comparable effort in Canada to coordinate programs or assess the overall picture. As a consequence, we have had only a vague and fragmentary idea of community service and service learning programming as it is practiced in high schools across the country.

The research reported here is a first attempt to fill this information gap. This report provides a snapshot of the approaches that have been adopted in each Canadian province and territory with respect to school-based community service and service learning.

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Defining Terms

Because the terms “community service” and “service learning” can mean different things to different people, we adopt the following definitions for the purposes of this research.

High School Community Service Program (CSP): a program in which students, without pay, perform service designed to benefit the community; the program is non-curriculum-based, may be mandatory or voluntary, does not usually include explicit learning objectives or organized reflection, and may include activities that take place on or off the school grounds.

High School Service Learning Program (SLP): a community service program in which the service is integrated into an academic course or curriculum; as such, the service has clearly stated learning objectives, and there is an opportunity as part of the course for students to engage in reflective or critical analysis about that service experience.

Methodology

The provincial and territorial profiles in this report are based on two sources of information. First, they draw on data already in the public domain – academic reports, government documents and Web sites, reports prepared for volunteer umbrella organizations such as Imagine Canada or Volunteer Canada, and school or community publications. For the most part, however, our profiles rely on information provided by school board or school officials and, in some cases, by Ministry of Education personnel. In the spring of 2006, our research team undertook to contact relevant personnel for every public and separate school jurisdiction in Canada. The team also sought to contact a representative sampling of private school authorities across the country. Initial contact with each jurisdiction was made by telephone or e-mail to determine who might be the best key informant for that jurisdiction. The research team then contacted that individual and conducted a semi-structured interview to gather the required information. In many cases, the school board referred our team to school personnel – principals, guidance counselors, or individual teachers – and our data for those

jurisdictions are based on interviews with these individuals. In some cases, our researchers contacted more than one school in a school board or division to reflect the differences in approach among schools.

Our purpose in this research was to identify both the pattern of programming in each province and any salient innovative program features. We are confident that our research has allowed us to do this. We contacted about 90% of the public and separate school jurisdictions in the country and secured interviews with personnel at about 60% of them. In the cases for which we did not conduct interviews, this was because the personnel we contacted did not return our calls, declined to be interviewed, or were not aware of relevant programming in their jurisdictions (see the Table 1 at the end of the report for an overview of contacts in each province and territory).

In the interviews that our team completed with school board and school officials, we sought the following information:

- Was there school-based community service programming in the jurisdiction or at the school?
- If there was no school-based community service programming in the jurisdiction, were there programs at particular schools within the jurisdiction?
- If the school board or school did have a program:
 - was it compulsory, directed, or encouraged for all schools?
 - were there detailed school board or school guidelines for the program?
 - was the program part of a course and, if so, was the course compulsory or elective?
 - if the program was not part of a course, did it apply to one grade or many grades?
 - what was the hourly commitment associated with the program?
 - how were hours tracked?
 - was graduation contingent on completing the program?
 - where could students perform community service?
 - did the school board or school have formal relationships with voluntary agencies?
 - was there an evaluation protocol for the program?

- at what level did this program originate (e.g., Ministry of Education, school board, school, department, class)?
- was there literature available about the program?
- Was the community service programming typical or atypical of other school boards or schools in the area?

General Observations

After we had gathered and analyzed information about community service programming across Canada, we were able to make the following general observations:

- It is clear that community service and service learning initiatives are not prominent features in high school curricula across the country. While some provincial ministries have relevant guidelines, school board Web sites seldom make any reference to these programs and front-line school-board staff seem to be largely unfamiliar with the terms, concepts, or details of this type of programming in their jurisdiction.
- There are enormous provincial differences in approach. Although variations of Ontario's general model, which involves a community service requirement for graduation, has been or is being adopted in a number of other jurisdictions, the most appropriate generalization is a caution against generalizing – there is a distinctive character to the programming in each province and territory.

With notable exceptions, differences in the extent of programming tend to be greatest *between schools* rather than between school boards or school divisions or between provinces. This is likely because effective programs require additional resources to establish community contacts, to facilitate appropriate student placements, and to monitor service. Even if a province or territory has chosen to mandate programming, if it does not make these additional resources available, the zeal with which individual schools apply the mandated programming becomes a function of staff willingness to take on

these extraordinary responsibilities. Because this willingness or ability varies from school to school, there are large variations in programming within school boards.

- Although the provinces and territories each have a distinctive approach to civic engagement programming, there are three factors that help to explain school-level differences in programming. These are as follows:
 - Faith-based schools are more likely than non-faith-based schools to promote community service among their students. This is the most significant of the three factors. Where schools are administered within a faith-based jurisdiction – whether publicly or privately funded – the level of community service and/or service learning tends to be higher than that in neighbouring public schools. As noted below, in many such jurisdictions, service has traditionally been a part of the faith-based curriculum and has been incorporated into specific compulsory courses.
 - Private schools tend to take a much more active role than do public schools in promoting community service by their students. As with faith-based school boards, private schools' experience with community service requirements in most cases predates recent provincial initiatives and frequently involves a greater time investment by students. In some of the larger schools, staff resources are dedicated to the community service program and incentives are offered for outstanding community service contributions. A number of these private schools have established links to community agencies to facilitate placements. In addition, 11 private schools across the country are members of Round Square (<http://www.athenian.org/programs/index.php>), a global association of schools committed to developing curricula that foster personal

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development and an ethic of community service. About a dozen more private schools are registered to offer the International Baccalaureate Diploma, an academic program that also has a specific and demanding civic engagement component to its curriculum (see below).

- About 102 secondary schools across the country are members of the International Baccalaureate Organization (<http://www.ibo.org/>). Community service is a core component of the IBO Diploma program. While specific details of the commitment vary across schools, a commitment of about 20 hours of service per year is typical, and there is usually an additional assignment that requires critical reflection about the experience from the student.

Provincial Profiles

In this part of the report, we present a brief synopsis of the patterns of community service and service learning programming that we have identified for each of the ten provinces and three territories. Some provinces' guidelines seem to have served as models for others. We begin with those apparent exemplars.

Ontario

Since 1999, the Ontario government has mandated a community service requirement as a condition for high school graduation. All high school students in the province must complete 40 hours of community service in a suitable community placement sometime between grade 9 and graduation at the end of grade 12. Because of this requirement, virtually all high schools in the province have developed practices for administering this community service program. The following are generalizations about these practices (for a general policy statement about the Ontario program, see <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/curricul/secondary/oss/oss.pdf>).

- Ministry of Education guidelines for the program specify the nature of the community

service requirement but are largely silent about how it is to be achieved or administered. Hence, implementation of the program has been left to school boards. These, in turn, with few exceptions, have delegated responsibility to the individual high schools, which have delegated the task to an individual in the school. In small schools, the principal might assume this role; in larger schools, the task is normally assigned to a guidance counselor or some other staff member.

- In most schools, primary responsibility for finding a suitable community service placement is left to the student and his or her parents. Most schools provide some written material with advice on how to go about this search, facilitate the process by posting placement opportunities sent by agencies, and maintain student records of community service hours logged. Although there are exceptions (e.g., some schools hold volunteer fairs to facilitate placements), most schools are not pro-active in seeking out volunteer opportunities within the community or in counseling students on how to secure appropriate placements.
- Ministry of Education guidelines stipulate that the community service placement must not be for pay or for academic credit (e.g., it cannot be part of a co-op placement) and must be completed outside of the student's instructional hours. Practices vary as to what kinds of placements are accepted. All schools accept not-for-profit agency placements, but there is no consensus on placements at for-profit organizations or on placements involving informal helping. Rural schools tend to be more flexible on these issues than their urban counterparts, in part because rural communities seem to afford fewer opportunities to place students in not-for-profit situations.
- There are exceptions to the general hands-off or laissez faire pattern of administration by school boards. For example, the Upper Grand District School Board, the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board, and the Ottawa School Board have all been much more active

in establishing relationships with local community voluntary organizations.

- Catholic separate school boards in Ontario have a much longer history of community service and service learning requirements for their students, and some have retained these service links in their compulsory religious education courses (For a description of a sample course outline for a grade 12 Religious Education course in Catholic high schools, see <http://www.curriculum.org/csc/library/profiles/12/pdf/HRE4MC.pdf>); however, it appears that for many of these schools, the new Ministry guidelines have supplanted earlier programming and the school practices in these cases are not much different from their counterparts in the public school boards

Service learning programs are distinguished from typical community service programs in that in service learning programs, service is an integral component of a course's curriculum and includes an element of reflection on the service experience. The new Ontario high school curriculum establishes a compulsory civics course, which includes among its objectives to foster a sense of civic purpose, community responsibility, and active citizenship. While this course would seem to provide an ideal opportunity to include a service learning component, we found no evidence of this. Indeed, service learning, as defined above, is encountered only in a limited number of Catholic separate schools and in some private schools. In those relatively few cases, a service learning component is incorporated in some education classes either as a class activity (e.g., a neighbourhood cleanup or food drive) or as an individual student undertaking. Undoubtedly, part of the reason for the paucity of service learning initiatives is that community service hours completed for these courses cannot be counted toward the student's 40-hour requirement.

British Columbia

The situation in British Columbia with regard to community service and service learning is difficult to describe at this time because the province has recently introduced a new requirement for high school graduation that potentially involves a

community service component and perhaps even a service learning component. However, the new program has not been running long enough to establish a track record of practice and is currently (January 2007) under review by the Ministry of Education. Pending this review, students entering high school as of 2004 must compile a Graduation Portfolio, which has a weight of four credits (out of the 80 in the new B.C. high school curriculum) and which will be graded by a review panel in the student's final year. The Portfolio is intended to be a record of the student's achievements during his or her three years at high school and must include 30 hours of work experience or community service. Because these 30 hours can be paid or unpaid, it is not clear to what extent this is a community service initiative. Most school boards report that they require at least 5 of the 30 hours to be unpaid community service. However, especially in the more remote jurisdictions, the few opportunities for community service and the premium on acquiring work experience dictate that the latter will be emphasized even more. As with most jurisdictions where the Ministry introduces province-wide requirements, the educators we interviewed in B.C. indicated that the new requirements have supplanted local school or class initiatives. ([For more information on the B.C. program, see http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/graduation/portfolio/word/core2.doc.](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/graduation/portfolio/word/core2.doc))

Manitoba

On its Web site, the Manitoba Ministry of Education places considerable emphasis on its responsibility to promote values consistent with good citizenship. As one means of achieving this objective, it has adopted a policy called *Local Developed Curricula*, which allows schools and students to design courses in which they can earn credit through 110 hours in a community placement. While some of these placements are similar to co-op placements in that they are career-oriented in the for-profit sector, there is also provision for Community Service Student Initiated Projects (CSSIP), which can be earned through work in the not-for-profit sector. Students who want to earn course credit for a CSSIP must secure approval for the course from their school, and the school is responsible for tracking students'

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placement hours (For the Ministry of Education's description of these initiatives see <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/docs/support/ldc/index.html>).

Not all school boards have encouraged these individual course projects, but a significant number actively promote them. Manitoba school boards also report other community service initiatives, but these seem to be very local in their application. For example, some schools have incorporated a service learning component into the compulsory grade 10 physical education course; these would seem to qualify as service learning initiatives as they involve both a pre-placement and a post-placement reflection assignment. Similarly, the Winnipeg Board of Jewish Education has introduced a 20-hour compulsory community service requirement for students in grade 9 and a 30-hour requirement for students in grade 10. It has also established formal relationships with community organizations to facilitate appropriate student placements.

Alberta

The Alberta community service model relies on local initiative. Unlike a number of other provinces and territories, the Alberta Ministry of Education has not mandated programming in this area; whether and how to approach community service is left to the discretion of individual school boards. As a consequence, there is considerable variation in how school boards have responded. These responses can be grouped into three general categories. The first response is to offer no community service programs. A significant number of school boards have responded in this way. It should be said that Alberta is distinctive in the emphasis the Ministry, school boards, and schools place on programs designed to enhance job skill development, employability, and career development in general. It seems that many Alberta jurisdictions and schools have chosen to allocate their resources for community-based programming in this direction – for example, apprenticeship, co-op, or job shadowing programs in partnership with the for-profit sector. The second response is to offer some limited opportunities for community service and service learning. For the most part, these are school-based programs that have been mounted by principals or

instructors, not school-board initiatives; as such, they are elective and vary enormously in form and substance. The third response, by Alberta Catholic school boards, by far the most active boards in the province in terms of community service programming, is to mandate a community service commitment of between 10-25 hours a year. This is normally associated with religious education courses that are compulsory for all students. Although the experience varies across school boards and schools, at least some of these programs have a service learning component in that reflection on service experience is incorporated into the course curriculum. (For details about the Alberta Ministry of Education's senior high school curriculum, see http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/k_12/curriculum/bySubject/srhigh2006.pdf).

Saskatchewan

Like Alberta, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education does not mandate community service. However, it does mandate a course – Wellness 10 – offered in grade 10, which appears to combine physical education with life skills preparation. Although it is not mandated, most public school boards in Saskatchewan have incorporated a community service component into the curriculum for this course. The nature of this component varies from board to board. In some schools, it entails a class assignment, such as fundraising or a neighbourhood cleanup project; in others, it involves an individual community service assignment that is worth up to 10% of the course grade. It appears that urban public school boards are more likely than their more rural counterparts to incorporate a community service component into this grade 10 course. As in other provinces, Catholic school boards in Saskatchewan have had a relatively long history of community service and service learning that is tied to their compulsory religious education classes. In general, these programs demand a greater commitment from students than is found in the public system (15-20 hours each year) but are more flexible in accepting informal volunteer activity as community service. Catholic school board personnel stressed that the focus of these courses is on social justice themes and indicated that there is a deliberate attempt to use community service

as a means of grounding those themes. This would imply that these Catholic school board programs might be better understood as service learning rather than community service programs. (For the Ministry's general overview of the Saskatchewan high school core curriculum, see <http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/policy/core/intro.html#4>).

Quebec

The Quebec government mandates high schools to enrich the “spiritual life of their students,” but has given individual schools the freedom and flexibility to tailor the application of this guideline to their specific community needs and circumstances. Perhaps as a consequence, there is considerable variability in the way schools have responded. In the English-language school boards, there are no board-wide community service programs, but there is evidence that a few schools have developed or are developing quite ambitious programs of their own. For example, one school reported a program in which students are required to complete 20 hours of community service each year. That school has also established a community network of partnerships to facilitate student placements and has instituted an evaluation process that also involved community participants. Another school has just initiated a pilot project requiring students in Grade 11 to complete 20 community service hours. However, these appear to be exceptional cases. Many schools report no programming of this sort. In the French-language school boards, a different model has emerged. While French-language school boards seem little involved in school community service initiatives, many, if not most, schools have hired guidance counselors – “animateurs de la vie spirituelle et engagement communautaire” – to implement the guideline. These are not usually full-time positions and each counselor is usually responsible for a number of schools. In a few cases, schools have chosen to employ this person to foster in-school programming (artistic, cultural, and sports programs), but most schools have opted to use these resources to promote student community engagement. In these cases, student participation is reported to be quite low – between 5% and 10% of the student body participate – but normally involves a commitment of one to two hours a week volunteering in the not-for-profit

sector. In a reversal of the pattern noted in most other provinces, rural Quebec schools appear to be more pro-active in community service programming than their more urban counterparts. One further initiative warrants mention: a few schools reported incorporating a service learning component into a civic education course – *Formation Personnelle et Sociale*. (For more information on education in Quebec, see <http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/daic/pdf/educqceng.pdf>).

New Brunswick

The New Brunswick Ministry of Education has not mandated its school boards or schools to mount programs designed to enhance student civic engagement, nor does it appear that school boards have adopted district-wide programming of this sort on their own. Hence, community service programs in New Brunswick tend to be school-specific and depend on the initiative of individual principals or instructors. Our contacts with schools suggest that most community service tends to be informal or student-initiated, although some instructors have incorporated a service learning component into their physical education and leadership courses. (For a Ministry overview of the high school program in Quebec, see <http://www.gnb.ca/0000/pol/e/316AA.pdf>).

Nova Scotia

The Ministry of Education in Nova Scotia does not mandate community service programming in the high schools, nor do there seem to be any school-board-wide programs in place, but at least some high schools have initiated limited programs for which students can volunteer their time. For example, one school had a breakfast program staffed by parent and student volunteers; another organized a tutoring, sports coaching, and playground program in which high school students help students at a neighbourhood elementary school. In all of these initiatives, volunteering was informal and elective and was not tracked. (For information high school programming in Nova Scotia, see <http://www.ednet.ns.ca/index.php?&cat=0&sid=503129200&>).

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Prince Edward Island

The Prince Edward Island government has adopted a novel approach to encourage student civic engagement through community service. It has provided a five-dollar post-secondary tuition bursary for every hour of community service high school students complete, up to a maximum of 100 hours (or \$500). Students in grade 11 and 12 are eligible, and placements are at the student's initiative. The bursary is payable to the student's chosen post-secondary institution within a year of high school graduation. Other than this, there appear to be few other initiatives at P.E.I. schools to promote community service or service learning. (For a Ministry description of its bursary program, see <http://www.gov.pe.ca/educ/index.php3?number=75652>).

Newfoundland and Labrador

In 2006, the province of Newfoundland and Labrador was in the process of introducing a mandatory community service requirement for high school students; the program was in the pilot phase when we did our research. The initiative resembles the Ontario model in that it will require students to complete 30 hours of community service as part of a compulsory course called Career Development 2201. Administration of course will be the responsibility of the course instructor. Information on the community contribution of the course can be found at http://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/sp/sh/career_educ/career_dev2201/cd2201_ccguidelines.pdf.

The Northwest Territories

The Northwest Territories has adopted a mandatory community service program similar to that in Ontario. Between grade 10 and graduation at the end of grade 12, students must accumulate 25 hours of community service. Unlike the Ontario model, this service is tied to a compulsory Grade 11 course – Career & Life Management – and, in most cases, includes a service learning component. Because of often-lengthy travel times to and from school and because there are limited opportunities for volunteering in remote communities, schools may permit students to complete their community service requirement

during school hours. (For a Ministry overview of the high school curriculum in the Northwest Territories, see http://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/Divisions/kindergarten_g12/indexK12.htm)

Yukon Territory

Yukon Territory has adopted the British Columbia Graduation Portfolio, which requires students to complete 30 hours of community-based service. As in B.C., the service may be paid or unpaid. The program has just been adopted and will apply to students graduating in 2008. (For the Ministry's overview of the high school curriculum in Yukon Territory, see <http://www.education.gov.yk.ca/graduation.html>)

Nunavut Territory

The Nunavut model for community service is very similar to that in the Northwest Territories. It requires students to complete 25 hours of service in a not-for-profit organization. Placement may be student-initiated or facilitated by school staff. Because the service is normally completed in grade 11 as part of a compulsory life management course in which there is a reflective component, the program qualifies as a service learning initiative. (For the Ministry's overview of the high school curriculum in Nunavut see <http://www.gov.nu.ca/education/eng/index.htm>).

Conclusions

It is apparent that there is a general recognition across the country that community service and service learning are worthwhile additions to the high school experience. In virtually every province and territory, we discovered initiatives of one kind or another and, since 1999, six of the thirteen provincial or territorial governments have introduced a community service requirement as a condition for high school graduation. That said, it is also apparent that most programs are not structured in a way that would provide the student with an ideal experience. (For a discussion of acknowledged best practices in this field, see Meinhard et al (2007)) In all cases, government requirements make very modest demands on students – Ontario asks the most (40 hours over four years). In addition, in some jurisdictions (e.g.,

British Columbia and Alberta), the impact of service has been diminished by conflating community service and job preparation objectives. Further, while much of the literature suggests that service learning greatly enhances the effectiveness of a community service experience, very few government initiatives have included this feature; indeed, the structure of some programs actually inhibits schools from developing service learning initiatives. Finally, there is little evidence that ministries of education have invested the additional resources necessary to extract maximum value from their initiatives. Most programs simply specify that students complete a required number of hours and leave administration of the program to individual schools. As a consequence, the effectiveness of programming – indeed, the existence of any programming at all in jurisdictions where there are no government-mandated requirements – seems to vary widely from school to school within the same school board and according to the energy and enthusiasm of individual principals and teachers. Exceptions to this general pattern can be found where agents other than governments have a role in setting the curriculum; specifically, in faith-based school jurisdictions and in private schools, where there seems to be a more systematic commitment to the idea that serving the community is an important value to impart through the school curriculum.

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Table 1. Contacts with Educators, by Province and School Type

	# of Boards/ Divisions	Contacts			Total Contacts
		# Public Board/ School Contacts	# of Separate Board/ School Contacts	# of Private School Contacts	
Newfoundland and Labrador	5	10		2	12
Nova Scotia	8	7		4	11
PEI	3	3		1	4
New Brunswick	14	8		6	14
Quebec	69	22 (French)	10 (English)	4	36
Ontario	73	57	18 (8 French)	46	129
Manitoba	40	33		1	34
Saskatchewan	22	11	4		15
Alberta	64	12	8		20
British Columbia	62	35		2	37
Yukon Territory	2	1			1
NWT	6	6			6
Nunavut	4	1			1
Total	372	189	49	65	321