



International
Solidarity
Service-Learning
Conference

Service-Learning & Democratic Citizenship Skills for the New World of Work

National Youth Leadership Council | 29th International
Solidarity Service-Learning Conference

Organized by:



In partnership with:



27th & 28th august 2026 | Buenos Aires - Argentina

Who We Are: National Youth Leadership Council

- Founded in 1983 — over 40 years advancing service-learning in the United States
- The leading national nonprofit dedicated to service-learning research, practice, and policy
- Partner with K–12 schools, districts, and communities across the country
- Our service-learning mission: Building a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world
 - Through high-quality service-learning that develops young people as active democratic citizens
- Pioneers of the IGNITE Service-Learning Cycle — a research-grounded framework for community-connected learning
- Partner with the Freudenberg Stiftung Foundation on the SLICE project: Service-Learning in Civic Education

The Challenge: Democracy Distance Among Young People

- MacWilliams (2023): Worryingly few young people firmly believe in democracy
 - Yet an encouraging number of 18–39 year-olds want to engage in their communities
- Young people espouse values of freedom, equality, and community
 - They long for an end to polarization, and hunger for connectedness and self-efficacy
- The “Civic Empowerment Gap” (Levinson, 2012): Students in lower-income communities face double disadvantage
 - Less access to civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for full democratic participation
- Unchecked democratic decline creates openings for authoritarian actors to exploit simmering tensions

Why Service-Learning? The Research Case

- Inquiry-based experiential learning improves content understanding and builds critical thinking
- Student-led learning increases motivation and builds agency
- Community-focused work builds communication, collaboration, and civic skills
- 61.9% of students showed increased awareness of community issues (Daniels & Ross, 2017)
- 57.2% reported stronger connectedness to their communities
- 60% demonstrated improved P-21 transferable skills
- Teachers who use service-learning are significantly more likely to use high-quality strategies — cooperative learning, real-world data, community connections

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Communities are the bedrock of a thriving democracy, where young people can directly impact the issues that shape their daily lives — if given the opportunity and support.

— NYLC Service-Learning in Civic Education Framework, 2024

The IGNITE Service-Learning Cycle

- A research-grounded framework that moves students through six integrated stages



IGNITE Service-Learning Cycle



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- I — INQUIRE: Explore personal values; identify a “personal stake in a public problem”
 - G — GATHER: Research community needs; bring in multiple voices and perspectives
 - N — NAVIGATE: Deliberate, decide on action, plan and prepare to act
 - I — IMPACT: Take action on the community need and measure results
 - T — TRANSFORM: Reflect deeply; connect local action to larger social issues
 - E — ELEVATE: Tell your story through social media, public speaking, showcases
- re-IGNITE: Reflect on impact and fuel others’ passion for community engagement

Competencies Developed: Democracy & The New World of Work

Democratic Citizenship

- Civic knowledge and critical thinking
- Understanding of democratic processes
- Community problem-solving
- Civic agency and self-efficacy
- Cross-cultural dialogue and empathy
- Informed action and advocacy
- Belief in democratic participation

New World of Work

- Collaboration and teamwork
- Communication (public speaking, media)
- Creativity and innovation
- Critical analysis and research
- Project management and planning
- Adaptability and resilience
- Leadership and initiative

SLICE: Service-Learning in Civic Education

- A three-year pilot in partnership with Freudenberg Stiftung Foundation (Germany–USA)
- Two prototypical U.S. high schools embedded in grades 9–12 curricula
- Three-stage design (Service-Learning By Design™):
 - Stage 1: Identify Youth Outcomes — civic, academic, SEL, career, leadership
 - Stage 2: Determine Evidence — artifacts of learning, formative & summative assessments
 - Stage 3: Plan Experiences Using IGNITE — community-focused, standards-aligned units
- Independent external evaluation led by Dr. Matthew MacWilliams
 - Measuring civic engagement, belief in democracy, academic outcomes, and community impact

IGNITE in Practice: Student & Teacher Experience

Students Experience

- Authentic community inquiry driven by their own values
- Real partnership with local organizations
- Taking action that creates measurable change
- Deep structured reflection at every stage
- Public presentation of their work
- A sense of ownership in democratic life

Teachers & Schools Experience

- Embedded professional development and coaching
- Community of practice across cohorts
- Academic rigor connected to C3 Framework standards
- Train-the-trainer sustainability model
- Cross-disciplinary curriculum integration
- A culture of civic engagement school-wide

Expected Outcomes & Why It Matters

- Increases in student academic performance within core curricula
- Increases in civic learning and engagement
- Deeper understanding of the link between community engagement and democracy
- Measurable increases in belief in democracy
- Within ten years: An established, replicable reference model for democracy education in the U.S.
 - Adaptable across urban, suburban, and rural contexts regardless of resource constraints
- Cross-cultural learning between Germany and the U.S. — understanding similarities and differences in democratic education
 - A model for international collaboration in civic education

Re-IGNITE Democracy

Together, we empower a generation of young citizens with the knowledge, skills, and passion to sustain vibrant democracies.

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