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EVENT REPORT

POLICY CAFE ON EDUCATION

Transforming Education Through Service-Learning in California's K-12



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Isabel Luciano
Director of Training
Participatory Budgeting Project



Lori Heslewood
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Ankur Patel
Director of Advancement for
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Kusuma Buddhiraju
(Moderator)
Scholar at Columbia University



Neeraja Deshpande
(Moderator)
Engaged as a Policy Writer



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WHY THIS CONVERSATION MATTERS?

Nearly 1 in 3 U.S. K–12 students participate in some form of service learning (Swain et al., 2025), yet access remains deeply uneven, especially in underserved schools. Service learning too often stays a supplemental privilege, not a systemic opportunity.

The answer lies in recognising service-based learning as more than volunteerism. It is a transformative educational model. When integrated meaningfully into schools, service learning equips students not only with academic knowledge but also with problem-solving skills, empathy, civic responsibility, and career readiness. These are the very competencies needed to thrive in today’s rapidly changing world.

California’s experience shows both promise and challenge: despite strong local innovations, fragmented funding and policy misalignment still limit scale and equity.

That’s why this Policy Cafe focused on making service learning a norm, not an exception, a model that combines academic learning with civic purpose, career readiness, and community empowerment. Drawing from Sewa International’s reach of 2,000+ students, the discussion explored how grassroots partnerships and culturally responsive models can drive systemic change in California’s education landscape.

Overall, 70 percent of schools with service-learning had students participating in grade-wide service-learning, where all students in one or more grades participated in a service project or program through academic course work (M. Maier,2025)

HOSTS



Srikanth Gundavarapu,
President of Sewa International USA led Sewa’s COVID-19 relief efforts and now guides the organization with vision and community trust.



Rakhi Israni,
Vice President of Public Relation and Government Relations at Sewa International USA experienced in public policy and stakeholder engagement.

MODERATORS

Kusuma Buddhiraju,
Pursuing a Master’s in Public Administration at Columbia University, she blends tech and policy expertise to advance innovation and social impact.



Neeraja Deshpande,
A writer, editor with work in the Washington Post, The Hill, City Journal, and The Free Press, she holds a BA from Wellesley College in Massachusetts.



MEET OUR PANELISTS

THEME I: UNDERSTANDING SERVICE LEARNING

Ankur Patel, An educator and public servant committed to civic engagement and values-based learning, he has taught across the U.S., South Korea, and China, bringing first hand classroom insight to education, labour and environmental issues.



Pam Siebert, Vice President of Community Impact and Evaluation at NYLC, she advances youth empowerment through service-learning and civic engagement, promoting community-rooted learning with real-world impact.

THEME II: EQUITY IN SERVICE LEARNING

Isabel Luciano, Director of Training & Curriculum Design at the Participatory Budgeting Project, empowers communities, especially youth, to shape public decisions and strengthen civic engagement.



Efrain Mercado Jr., Director of California Policy at the Learning Policy Institute, he advances equitable education reforms that support educators and promote college and career readiness for all students.

Elizabeth Navarro, Migration policy analyst focused on immigrant education, inclusion, and equity in U.S. schools, amplifying research and policy insights through storytelling.



THEME III: IMPACT OF SERVICE LEARNING



Lori Heslewood, Director of Operations at the South Carolina Afterschool Alliance, she advances community-based learning and youth leadership through quality afterschool programs statewide.

Ramona Schindelheim, Journalist for the Future of Work(ers) Newsletter, she crafts data-driven stories on education, workforce development, and the future of work.



MOMENTS THAT MATTERED



1. From Volunteering to Transformation

Pam Siebert of NYLC emphasized that true service learning goes beyond community hours it's a structured pedagogy where reflection drives both community impact and personal transformation.



Reflection is not an afterthought; it is where the deepest learning happens.

-Pam Siebert



3. Youth in Community needs Assessments

Isabelle Luciano of the Participatory Budgeting Project showed how integrating service learning with participatory budgeting can deeply enhance civic participation by engaging youth in decisions on public spending through paid youth employment programs.



2. Reflection as a Core Practice

Lori Heslewood of the South Carolina Afterschool Alliance noted that effective service learning can “shift power, redistribute resources, and include those historically overlooked.” Embedding reflection throughout the process transforms service into true learning.



4. Cultural and Ethical Foundations

Educator Ankur Patel emphasised that service learning must be grounded in dharma, righteous action rooted in empathy and responsibility. His call to “centre education in selfless service” brought moral urgency to the discussion.



Service learning isn't optional, it's essential.

-Ankur Patel

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED



5. Policy and Funding Alignment

Efrain Mercado Jr. of the Learning Policy Institute highlighted that to scale service learning, we must “engage policy makers and show them what is happening,” letting them witness student engagement and hear stories firsthand.

Education policy today is far more aligned with the whole-child approach than it was 10–20 years ago

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—Elizabeth Navarro



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Storytelling makes the value of service learning real for kids

—Efrain Mercado Jr.



6. Cultural and Ethical Foundations

Migration policy analyst Elizabeth Navarro noted that service learning situates students within broader social systems, fostering belonging and civic responsibility. Embedding it in the school day removes barriers for rural or working students while strengthening community and parental buy-in.

7. Storytelling and Public Visibility

Ramona Shindelheim of The Future of Work(ers) stressed that data matters, but stories move people. She noted that service learning builds “soft skills” like problem-solving, teamwork, and communication traits employers value but struggle to teach.

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Parents can be both bridges and barriers to service learning

—Ramona Shindelheim

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS



Policymakers must integrate service learning into state and district education standards, ensuring it's assessed and funded as a core part of curriculum, not an extracurricular add-on.



Educators must Design service-learning curricula, partnering with local organisations that combine academic rigor with civic relevance through structured reflection and collaboration.



Parents must Advocate for service-learning opportunities in schools and model civic participation through family or neighborhood projects.



Students must Take ownership of their learning by identifying local challenges, designing solutions, and leading reflection on outcomes.



Civil Society must Build sustained partnerships with schools to co-design community-based service projects.



Media must Highlight success stories and local innovations in service-based learning to shape public perception and policy attention.

Synthesising insights from Experts into a Sectoral Report that outlines policy recommendations, case studies, and practical models for California.

Exploring Sewa's LEAD program as a potential model for community-driven service-learning in education.

Conducting survey research with 100+ respondents: K-12 students, teachers, Sewa USA LEAD volunteers



THANK YOU!

Sewa International

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