

MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Student Service Learning Guidelines for Faith Organizations in the Community

There is a difference between *volunteering* services to a religious or other nonprofit organization and opportunities that qualify for student service learning (SSL). *Volunteering* is not a Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) graduation requirement governed by State and local guidelines. Religious and other nonprofit organizations provide many opportunities for students to *volunteer* in the overall mission and programming of the organization; and these same organizations may provide *service-learning* opportunities which meet the guidelines set by the MSDE and Montgomery County Public Schools. Because State and county guidelines restrict SSL to secular opportunities, not all *volunteer* opportunities performed in the context of a faith community qualify as *service-learning* for MCPS students. MCPS students may choose to participate as *volunteers* in opportunities that promote the furtherance of religious, but SSL hours cannot be awarded for such involvement. The following are key to faith organizations awarding SSL opportunities:

- Address and/or serve issues and populations beyond their religious community and general membership.
- Serve the wider public (generally an underserved population: poor, elderly, infirmed, disabled, at-risk youth, etc)—not just members of a particular faith community or those who are adherents to their denomination.
- Be an activity that is open to the non-denominational public
- If educational, be in a setting that has a secular curriculum and secular programming.

Examples of key points:

Can SSL hours be earned by camp counselors or activity assistants in denominational summer camps such as Vacation Bible School? Yes, but only when the program is advertised to and attended by the non-denominational public. SSL hours are awarded only for secular curriculum and secular programming or recreation, such as sports, swimming, secular crafts, serving snacks, etc. SSL hours cannot be earned for any activities that involve prayer, liturgy, or the furtherance of religious tradition.

Can SSL hours be earned by acting as a class/teacher aide in a congregationally-based program, including tutoring/teaching a foreign language? Generally not, SSL hours are awarded only in the context of an educational setting whose purpose is secular, not religious or faith-based. Tutoring or classroom assistance does not qualify for SSL in congregational programs whose curriculum focuses on instruction (or language instruction) for the purpose of the furtherance of religious observance.

Does providing childcare while parents attend meetings at the religious organization site qualify? Yes, but only when the meetings address a community need and/or serve a population beyond the faith membership and do not support a for-profit business; eligible activities might include: teaching English classes, offering workshops open to the general public, blood drives, fitness classes, non-denominational music gatherings. SSL hours cannot be earned for meetings for congregation members only, and/or those that are focused on religion or worship.

Does tutoring another in preparation for a religious service, or participation in a religious service qualify? No, all SSL must address a recognized need beyond congregation membership in the greater community.

Does providing clerical or administrative support to a religious organization qualify? Yes, but only when the support addresses a recognized need in the greater community, e.g. managing a food pantry. SSL hours cannot be earned for assistance focused on membership mailings, updating congregation websites, or any other community-building aspect of a faith-based group that does not include the general public.

Can SSL hours be earned while serving an independent community nonprofit as part of a faith-based group opportunity? Yes, but only when a need in the greater community (beyond congregation membership) is addressed. Opportunities such as working in a soup kitchen, clothing center, housing or homeless program, or painting a senior housing facility, even when done with a religiously-affiliated group such as a congregational youth group, qualifies for SSL.