Service is at the heart of everything we do at buildOn, and the 2022-2023 school year showed us that when passionate young people come together to uplift their communities, we all feel the ripple effect of their efforts.

When we began the school year, the effects of COVID-19 could still be felt across the nation. Service partners in our local communities limited the number of slots offered to volunteers due to their own financial capacity, COVID-19 restrictions, and safety concerns. Despite those challenges, buildOn staff worked tirelessly to facilitate safe, impactful service for our students.

This year, we engaged 6,713 students in completing nearly 50,000 hours of service-learning in their communities—a 13.5% increase over the previous school year. Across all of our regions, buildOn students are doing more service in class, after school, and on weekends. They’re serving at food pantries and soup kitchens, planting urban gardens, and campaigning for environmental justice. The service these compassionate youth are leading is making a profound difference not only in their schools and communities, but in their own lives as well.

I am genuinely excited about the journey that lies ahead of us. Together, we will build upon our past achievements, overcome challenges, and drive buildOn U.S. to even greater heights. I firmly believe that our combined efforts and shared vision will enable us to create an even greater impact across the communities we serve. Thank you for championing the work we do!

In Solidarity,
Travis T. Welcome
Chief Program Officer, U.S.
Service-learning opportunities provide high school students with invaluable experiences that go beyond traditional classroom education. Engaging in service-learning not only enhances academic knowledge but also fosters personal growth, empathy, and a sense of civic responsibility. That’s why buildOn aims to engage 30% of the student body at each of our partner schools in service-learning opportunities. By actively participating in community service projects, students gain practical skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, and communication, which are essential for their future success. Moreover, service-learning allows students to connect with individuals from diverse backgrounds and understand societal issues firsthand. These experiences cultivate empathy and compassion, helping students develop a deep understanding of the challenges faced by others and the power they possess to make a difference.

During the 2022–23 school year, we reached 34% of all students enrolled in buildOn’s partner schools.
buildOn’s expansion into East English Village Preparatory Academy in Detroit has been a resounding success. During the 2022-2023 school year, 397 students were engaged in 1,648 hours of service learning. “buildOn’s partnership with EEVPA has been so successful because of the hard work and dedication of the students who have come out to join us; the incredible partners we worked with in serving Detroit; the support of the entire Detroit Regional Program staff at buildOn; and the fantastic administration and motivated teachers we had the honor to work with,” says Kyla Nogalski, buildOn’s Engagement Specialist at the school. “The EEVPA Bulldog spirit is everywhere and in everything we do, which is unlike any school I’ve had the chance to work with before. Finally, I’d be remiss if I did not mention our special partnership in service at Capuchin Soup Kitchen on Conner Street. This weekly service was something the students grew so much from, and it taught them more about Food Justice in Detroit than they knew before.”
The success of this new partnership is largely due to the hard work, relationship building, and strategic planning led by buildOn staff at the school. “One of the strongest strategies I used was building relationships within the school,” says Carolyn Roach, Senior Engagement Manager at Bridgeport Military Academy. “Building relationships with students and teachers allowed buildOn to be a part of the school culture, with buy-in from the majority of the school. With buildOn, students developed their leadership skills by having opportunities to lead service projects in school. Additionally, collaborating with teachers allowed buildOn to bring a new perspective and creativity in the classrooms. Particularly with this school, if a student, teacher, or staff member was involved with buildOn, others would want to be involved as well creating a snowball effect. One major highlight from the year was the art students from Bridgeport Military Academy creating a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. coloring book to donate to Roosevelt Elementary School in honor of MLK Day. The art students created and designed drawings of Dr. King and we printed over 100 coloring books to donate!”

Collaboration with administration and teachers has been key in launching buildOn’s programming at Gotham Collaborative High School in the Bronx. “The partnership at Gotham has been so successful due to support from administration and teachers, and the hard work put in from the buildOn staff. My colleague Ishani and I work together with the school to be clear on what each of our needs are, but most importantly the impact we want to make within the Gotham school community,” says Stephanie DeJesus, buildOn’s Program Manager at the school. “Which leads to the real stars of the show: the students. A favorite memory of mine that I would like to highlight was when a few Gotham students came out to volunteer at the Catholic Charities Food Pantry. The students had to prepare bags of canned goods and give them out to the community and on this day it rained but the students didn’t complain or make a fuss; they just continued to hand bags out with smiles on their faces. They also weren’t all friends at the start of the day, but by the end of that service they left with a shared experience of giving back, newly found friendships, and a sense of community within buildOn. The students at Gotham are so eager to take part in change and be a better version of themselves. The program truly wouldn’t be successful without them!”
Service Learning

Through buildOn’s Service Learning Programs, students in our 24 partner high schools are given opportunities to take on the most pressing issues in their communities through direct action. By helping seniors, the unhoused, and advocating for environmental justice, these students are learning to lead by first learning how to serve. Each service project follows the I.P.A.R.D model (Investigation, Preparation, Action, Reflection and Demonstration). Students start by investigating the issues most affecting themselves and their communities, then they work closely with buildOn staff to prepare projects that address these issues. Next comes the service projects themselves where students take action and work together to address their community’s greatest needs. At the end of each project, buildOn students spend time reflecting on the impact and importance of their service. Afterwards, they continue to demonstrate what they learned by advocating for those causes and raising awareness.

Social Justice Series

buildOn’s Social Justice Service Learning Series curriculum was developed in alignment with the goals of high schools and teachers. The series focuses on community-specific issues, with each lesson designed to promote social and emotional skill-building through experiential learning. Each month, students focus on one social justice journey, exploring that issue to gain a deeper understanding of it in their own community. This exploration provides clarity around the systems of oppression and injustice that affect the lives of the community members they serve. Students then participate in meaningful service opportunities to alleviate the suffering of others and to create change.
Trek

Through buildOn’s Trek program, students have the opportunity to travel internationally to a buildOn partner country, work alongside community members to construct a new school, and participate in a genuine cultural exchange. Most international volunteer experiences cost thousands of dollars, making them cost prohibitive for students from economically disadvantaged homes and underfunded schools. buildOn’s Trek program provides equitable access to international service opportunities, so that all youth have the chance to gain the skills, knowledge, and experiences they need to become globally-minded citizens and leaders. During their 11-12 day Trek, students stay with host families and spend their days working side-by-side with the community members to build the new school. They also engage in cultural workshops and discuss the country’s socio-economic situation, inequalities, gender issues, customs, and history.

This school year, 56 buildOn U.S. students participated in five Treks, helping to build schools in Nepal, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.
Each month, buildOn students helped to stock the food pantry at the Bridgeport Rescue Mission. This pantry offers fresh produce, dry goods, meat, and dairy items to families struggling with food security in Bridgeport. buildOn students also assisted residents in picking out items and helped to clean and organize the pantry.

buildOn students partnered with the Urban Compassion Project in Oakland which connects the community with their unhoused neighbors through weekly cleanups. The students’ service aided in rebuilding trust in the community, as well as discouraging illegal dumping in an effort to keep the area clean and safe.
buildOn students partnered with the Chicago Love Fridge project to build and install public refrigerators. Through this ingenious initiative they stocked each refrigerator with fresh produce, canned goods, and other non-perishable items and placed them in neighborhoods where many residents are experiencing hunger.

Detroit students served at the Michigan Urban Farming Initiative where they weeded, raked, harvested vegetables, and prepared the gardens for winter. Through their work, they are reducing food insecurity and providing families in Detroit with healthy, organic produce.
In Boston, buildOn students partnered with Heading Home, a local organization that provides emergency shelter and transitional housing to community members experiencing poverty and homelessness. The students crafted winter warming baskets, which included delicious homemade chocolate chip cookies and messages of encouragement, and delivered them to the residents at Heading Home’s shelters.

Every week, buildOn students from the Bronx served at Oval Rec Center as part of their pen pal program where they wrote encouraging letters back and forth with middle school students. They also volunteered during the center’s large community events such as their annual Halloween “Unhaunted” House, and a spring fun day which included games and activities for the community. At this event the students distributed 150 free grocery packages to the community!
MEET THE STUDENTS
“It feels like we’re giving back to the community that raised us. People say it takes a village, and it feels like we’re becoming part of that village.”

Joanne Li,
buildOn student, Sophomore,
Oakland High School, Oakland
99 Service Learning Hours
“I joined buildOn in April 2022 because I wanted to make a difference in the community that I live in and meet new people. I think that buildOn students are making a difference by providing for and helping those in need—making those people feel wanted and not forgotten.”

– Samantha Montes-Cuatzo
buildOn student
Sophomore, Harding High School, Bridgeport
131 Service Learning Hours

I believe that it’s important for students to serve because it brightens everyone’s day. Just based off of the little things that we do, I can already tell how much it impacts our communities. When we go into communities and pick up stuff and help around there, we notice that children are watching and how happy they look. It’s just really inspiring and it’s a good way to bring the community together as a whole.”

Jeremiah Jackson
buildOn student, Sophomore, Osborn High School, Detroit
60 Service Learning Hours
“I never would have thought of joining a program like this, but I’m really, really happy that I did because I met some amazing people and I feel like my communication skills are just a lot stronger now. I’m also a more confident person, I’ve noticed. I feel like I can help anybody. I love buildOn. I think it’s a great program and I hope we continue to have it at our high school because it’s really important.”

Ella Chavez  
buildOn student, Senior, Benito Juarez High School, Chicago  
49 Service Learning Hours

“My favorite service project was baking cookies for Heading Home’s Transitional Shelter because it was fun, helped the community feel connected and it also helped us learn a practical skill: baking. I learned that it never hurts to give back, even if you don’t have much. Try to give back as much as you can, because the feeling you get from service is unlike any other.

A little can go a long way.”

DJ Harris  
buildOn student, Senior, CASH High School, Boston  
133 Service Learning Hours
For Leila Tazi, buildOn has always been about community—the community she formed with her buildOn peers at Harry Truman High School, and the service projects she participated in that brought her closer to her larger community in The Bronx, New York.

Leila’s journey with buildOn began in 2016, when she was a freshman in high school. “buildOn was my thing in high school,” she says. “It was a space that I could be in and be around people that I really liked. It was my community.” Throughout her high school career Leila completed an astounding 384 service learning hours. One of her favorite projects was with an organization called KEEN, that offers free recreational opportunities to children and young adults with disabilities by pairing them with trained volunteers for fun, noncompetitive activities like sports, yoga, and dance. “It was one of my first experiences working with children with disabilities. It was really special because I got to meet a lot of different children from all different walks of life. And really my job was so easy, I just had to play with them and keep them company and be there for them,” recalls Leila, who continued to volunteer with the program in her free time after buildOn.

After graduating in 2020, Leila went on to attend Brooklyn College in New York. At the time, she had no idea that in the years ahead both buildOn and the service she had done with special needs children would re-enter life in new and exciting ways. Leila chose to pursue a degree in speech language pathology and audiology science while simultaneously working at a residential facility that specializes in pediatric palliative care. When she first started, Leila was simply looking for a job but she soon realized that the service she’d done at KEEN had in many ways helped pave the path she is on today. “I initially didn’t even tie this new job together with what I’m pursuing or with past experiences. It was kind of like the universe guided me toward it and I feel very strongly about that. However, it was when I got to this job and I got to this place where I’m at, that my past experiences and my current schooling and training all came together and it makes so much sense.”

Then, in 2021, Leila ran into a friend and fellow buildOn alumni, Michael Nguyen, who told her about how he was continuing to serve with buildOn as an Alumni Facilitator and encouraged her to join. Leila immediately applied for the program and began her role supporting buildOn’s immersions. “It was my first time in this setting as an alumni in a different space, but it was the same sense of community,” says Leila. “I wanted to go back for my community, but also for my friends and for the service.”
Over the past two years, Leila has continued to stay involved with buildOn, helping to lead buildOn Service Immersions in Chicago, Oakland, and even with her alma mater, Truman High School, in The Bronx. She remains an ardent believer in the power of service to transform both individuals and communities, and she wants to make sure that other young people have the same opportunities for leadership and service that she had.

“I’m from The Bronx. I’m from a low-income background. The food pantries I would volunteer at—those were the same food pantries my parents would go to get food from even before I ever did service there. So it’s just all connected,” says Leila. “There’s this mentality that people who aren’t doing well, we need to be saved. But the reality is, as a community, we have all the tools to help ourselves. And I think with buildOn what’s so special, with domestic service but also with service abroad, is that we’re not a charity that’s going to save you and we’re not going to give you the tools. You already have the tools. Maybe we’ll help you navigate those tools, we’ll work with you, we’ll mentor you, we’ll support you, but it’s you who’s doing it. We are the change. I was so empowered by buildOn, because it showed me that my community is my community and at the end of the day, I don’t need an outside source coming in to support and uplift this community. Service is empowering, it teaches people that we are so capable and we have autonomy over ourselves and over our future. And I think that’s really a beautiful thing.”

Thank you, Leila, and all of our buildOn U.S. students for being the change we want to see in the world.
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WE NEVER GIVE UP

None of this would be possible without the courage and determination of buildOn students, and the support of people like you. Thank you for helping to make the 2022-2023 school year one of our best years yet and we hope that you’ll join us on the road ahead as we work to bring the transformative power of service to more students this fall.