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Service Learning Required

But What Exactly Do Students Learn?

By Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne

INTEREST in government may be down, but volunteer work is up. Studies show that young people in particular are less inclined than a decade ago to take an interest in government affairs, while they are far more likely to be involved in nonpaid community-service projects. Both contributing to and capitalizing on this phenomenon, school-based service-learning programs have become increasingly popular, spreading community-service actions across the nation like points of light at a planetarium.

Last fall, in an effort to foster a sense of civic duty in teenagers, the Chicago public school system became the largest district in the nation requiring students to spend a set number of hours volunteering in soup kitchens, cleaning up parks, assisting in hospitals, or monitoring pollution in streams in exchange for the right to a diploma. Cities such as Atlanta and Washington and the entire state of Maryland already have similar requirements. And this past September, Ontario instituted the first province-wide rule in Canada to oblige students to volunteer for a minimum of 40 hours. A recent study by the National Center for Education Statistics reveals that 83 percent of high schools currently offer community-service opportunities (compared with 27 percent in 1984).

Indeed, by next year, the total number of students in North America engaged in community service will top 13 million. Why? Because most agree that schools should encourage good citizenship, and that good citizenship means helping when help is needed.

But as politicians and pundits as diverse as Bill Clinton and Bill Bradley, Edward M. Kennedy and George W. Bush, Jesse L. Jackson and William F. Buckley tout the benefits of youths' serving in their communities, and as millions of dollars are spent on local and federally supported school-based service programs, educators

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from schoolhouse to statehouse are neglecting to answer the simplest of questions: In the service of what?

For the past seven years, we have been studying a range of programs designed to help students be better citizens through community service. After observing dozens of programs in action, interviewing hundreds of teachers and students, and analyzing thousands of surveys, one lesson is clear: Not many people agree on what a good citizen does.

Some programs are based on the belief that good citizens show up to work on time and pay taxes. In one school in New York, 32 percent of the students fulfilled their new service requirement by working for one of the country's largest banks. In another school, close to half the students "served" in local businesses that included fast-food- restaurant franchises, stores in the local mall, and a stock brokerage.

Other educators, in an effort to build consensus, have endorsed the view that citizenship simply entails acting decently toward the people around you. Students in those programs pick up litter or help out in homeless shelters. The principal rationale for the community-service requirement in Atlanta, for example, was that it would ensure that students recognized "the responsibility to help others."

Unfortunately, too few of these programs teach students the skills that citizens of a democracy must have if they are to help shape social policy on behalf of those in need. Too few of them make students aware of the difficulties involved in changing the circumstances that lead to rivers or parks being dirty or to individuals and families being hungry. Too few of them equip students to pursue legislative remedies to unjust situations, remedies that can improve society.

When the NCES asked educators to identify the most important goals for service learning, 53 percent wanted students to become active community members,

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51 percent wanted students to become knowledgeable community members, 48 percent wanted students to meet real community needs, and 46 percent wanted to encourage altruism and caring for others. Those designing the survey did not bother to ask whether a goal of service learning might be to help students analyze social problems, their causes, or possible solutions. Indeed, only 19 percent responded that a primary goal of service learning is to teach critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. Helpful activity decoupled from social analysis is the locus of a vast majority of programs.

As the name of the federal legislation to "Serve America" implies, most of the programs emphasize altruism, charity, and simple participation. They teach that personal responsibility is the solution to the nation's problems, that community service is a nice thing to do instead of politics. This kind of service risks being understood as a kind of noblesse oblige, a private act of kindness performed by the privileged that simply reinforces the status quo.

Few programs, for example, ask students to assess corporate responsibility or the ways government policies improve or harm society. Few programs ask students to examine the history of social movements as levers for change. It should come as no surprise, then, that service is often viewed by participants as a desirable alternative to governmental action and legislative change. Citizenship is emphasized, but the connection between citizenship, politics, and government legislation is obscured.

Acts of civic decency are important, but citizenship in a democratic society requires more than kindness. To become truly effective citizens, students (especially

those in high school) have to learn how to create, evaluate, criticize, and change public norms, institutions, and programs. For example, a group in one school studied domestic violence and led workshops for their peers on how to avoid it. Students in another school worked with a community center to prevent a dangerous waste-disposal plant from being built in their community and helped create a commission to promote equitable placement of future sites. We should applaud these bold efforts. These teachers and service-learning organizers use the power of experiences helping others to teach students to address complex social problems and their causes.

Furthermore, though service-learning programs that teach social and political analysis are by no means prevalent, there already exist some promising initiatives. The Surdna Foundations' Effective Citizenry program, for example, funded 10 curriculum groups across the country engaged in democratic-values education. In our study of these programs, we have seen compelling evidence that when service experiences are combined with rigorous analysis of related social issues, students do develop the attitudes, skills, and knowledge necessary to respond in productive ways.

Similarly, in both quantitative and qualitative studies of other service-learning efforts in Chicago and New York, we found that when participants examined difficult problems in society related to social and economic injustice, their commitment to become involved and to seek solutions to these problems increased.

What do students learn through their community service? If students serve the homeless and enjoy the rewards of volunteering but do not study the various causes of homelessness, what lessons are they learning? If they ladle soup for those who are hungry but do not explore the conditions that brought individuals and families to their counter, is there a risk? We think so. Volunteerism will always be an important support for our society and for our humanity. It will also always be insufficient.

Only through collective action as citizens can we begin to address the fundamentally important and difficult challenges we face as a society. If the focus on service downplays or distracts attention from systemic causes and solutions, far from helping, the current emphasis that service-learning requirements place on volunteerism may lead students to embrace an impoverished conception of their civic potential. When the emphasis is on helping but not on the factors that create the need for help, we risk teaching students that need is inevitable, that alleviating momentary suffering but not its origins is the only expression of responsible citizenship.

What kind of society does service learning lead students to work toward? What values do different community-service activities promote? Will a service-learning requirement teach students to work for a more responsive society or simply to accept the status quo?

As millions of dollars are spent on school-based service programs and as a growing number of school districts, cities, states, and provinces require students to perform community service to receive a diploma, these questions merit the immediate attention of those who take seriously the idea that school-based community service can be an important part of educating citizens in a democracy.

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