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Working at Learning

Education Week

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Working at Learning

School-to-work, community-service, and service-learning programs

Teach students to learn by doing. But are schools the right place for them?

The pressure is on. National and community leaders are sending signals to schools to get with the program and find ways to prepare schoolchildren to address the needs of a changing nation. School officials are struggling to ensure that students are armed with critical-thinking and problem-solving skills to give the American workforce a competitive edge in the dynamic global economy. Schools must also introduce students to the world of work to ensure they become productive members of society. And they must teach students to be more civic-minded and oriented toward leadership as well as to claim more responsibility for their neighborhood's development. Faced with such a mission, many schools look to school-to-work, community-service, and service-learning programs for curriculum strategies.

All three approaches subscribe to the philosophy of experiential education—learning by doing—to get students into their communities for active learning. Only their purposes are different. School-to-work programs prepare students for careers; service learning and community service seek to instill civic responsibility. And, while most agree with the broad intentions of these programs and with what they mean for shaping students, many disagree on the role that schools should play in delivering them.

Proponents champion the idea of schools forming partnerships with community-based organizations, pooling the efforts of neighbors and teachers, and creating "schools without walls" in the hope of instilling visions in their students' heads of their future livelihood. Equipped with such a sense of possibility, the theory goes, students will be more inclined to plug away at academics; they can see that their hard work will pay off down the road.

But critics argue that teaching job skills and engaging students in community-service projects are not part of a school's core mission. Schools already struggle to simply teach the basics; teachers hardly have the time or energy to add yet another "extra" to their lesson plans. Moreover, some children simply are not ready for these experiential programs until they have mastered at least the fundamentals.

In this special section, one writer insists that educators must now look outside the "prism of school" and into other community-based organizations to educate today's students. Another writer, who played a key role in developing Maryland's high school community-service requirement, asserts that teaching such skills is a fundamental part of schools' missions. On the other hand, a concerned grandparent argues that such programs are unnecessary curriculum "add-ons" that schools should not be burdened with, especially because the strategies do not work for every student.

Finally, two high school teachers reflect on how they integrated school-to-work and service-learning projects into the curriculum—to the benefit of the students and the community.

This special Commentary report, one in a series examining crucial issues in education, is being underwritten by a grant from the Philip Morris Companies Inc.
'Academics And Life'

The idea that effective and exciting learning can happen throughout the community, not solely in the classroom, is enjoying something of a revival in American education. The school-to-work movement, national and community service, and school-based learning are integral parts of this renaissance.

While there are differences among the three mini-movements, they share several important fundamentals. Young people prefer an active rather than passive learning environment. Various community institutions—families, employer workspaces, local government, nonprofit citizens’ organizations—offer powerful, learning experiences. Those structured experiences in the community can make real and meaningful the academic content of formal school-based learning. Practicing elsewhere what one learns in school is the best way to enhance and reinforce educational learning and to call it forth when it is needed in later life.

In the words of Hillary Pennington, the president of Jobs for the Future, a Boston-based workforce-development group, "We see service learning as a close cousin to work-based learning, one which shares many of its benefits. For example, service learning is one of the few opportunities for students to experience what it means to contribute to society—to make a difference—especially during a period of adolescent growth when this experience is very developmentally important. It reconnects the student to his or her community, and the school (if the effort is school-based) to its neighborhood. Moreover, service learning, like other approaches to experience, contextualizes the student's learning, whether that learning stems from the classroom, the workplace, or the service project. Service learning, if done well, provides the environment in which students can gain organizational, team, and problem-solving skills, and other attitudes and capabilities necessary to future work and learning."

These three mini-movements should be viewed through a broader prism than that of schooling.
"All Students Can Serve"

By Margaret A. O'Neil

Middle school students visit a "senior citizens" home once a week to discuss their lives with the residents. Stories from such events as the Great Depression, World War II, and Watergate mirror the students' account of history, as their textbooks could never convey.

The students also learn about themselves as they engage in "service learning," a form of experiential learning. The students' seniors comprehend and make a contribution to students' learning. This is service learning.

High school students study botany to learn about various tree species, their nutritional needs, and ecological value. They plant trees on the school property to replace those that were planted years ago in memory of deceased students. This is service learning once again.

Schools can truly engage students in service to the community. And the use of public policy, schools can and should make it clear that caring for others and the community are characteristics of responsible adults. And we should engage students in learning that is relevant, interesting, and purposeful. Service learning accomplishes these objectives.

Service learning is beneficial to the student in the community possibly. "Service learning" is that young people are engaged in the community. Service learning gives them meaningful work and authentic experience of belonging. One state, Maryland, and 26 percent of all U.S. school districts have the stated expectation that students will have service learning experiences.

All students can serve. Each person can do something for his or her community and the planet. Students help younger peers by tutoring, helping with homework, coaching sports teams, and teaching adults to run after-school activities. Fire and rescue squads and emergency preparedness organizations are served by young people who join their cadet programs. Community organizations, such as libraries, museums, and animal shelters, benefit from the people who help with special projects and everyday activities.

The school district in Maryland, the Maryland Youth Policy Forum, a Washington-based professional-development organization for youth policymakers, has designed their own service-learning programs. To earn the superintendent's approval, programs must include developmentally appropriate, action, and reflection, as well as be a record-keeping mechanism to mark students' progress toward fulfilling the graduation requirement.

Because we are the first state to tackle such an effort—engaging all students in service learning—we have had to begin from scratch. Developing leadership and resources for service learning. Over time, this program has developed. Students and teachers have built consensus around good classroom practice and how to administer service learning. As a result, the state's practice has evolved and improved. We have documented what we have learned and are using those tools to evaluate and continuously improve service learning.

Another challenge in our mandated service-learning program has been to match the public's understanding of the spirit of the law with the reality of its implementation. Service learning requires that the students, their teachers, and their schools engage in meaningful, real-world experiences that contribute to the community.

The author is the executive director of the Maryland Student Service Alliance, a Baltimore-based public-private partnership with the Maryland Department of Education.
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Sounds like volunteering, accepted or rejected on that basis rather than the educational process it is. The proponents now have to deal simultaneously with the public, policymakers, and teachers about service learning.

Mandated service learning is controversial. Some people in the community confuse it with "community restitution" that judges order criminals to do for the public, policymakers, and teachers about service learning.

Mandated service learning is controversial. Some people in the community confuse it with "community restitution" that judges order criminals to do. And it raises questions about the academic value of students' association with religious organizations, scouts, or other groups. In addition, some feel that the work of a service-learning project is diminished if everyone is doing it. But controversy has helped us articulate our goals and broaden the dialogue while helping the community come to consensus on the value of service learning.

People in the community do not always agree to "the reform of the month" is another hurdle. The cynical view that "this too shall pass" has forced some school systems into crisis mode. But now that graduation for the first class with the service-learning mandate is just over a year away, school administrators are struggling to inform students and parents of the requirement.

Next year, some 40,000 Maryland students are expected to graduate, having participated in service learning. All 24 school systems have developed service-learning programs. Maryland has also developed statewide program-improvement tools based on what teachers and administrators have learned. We are implementing service-learning guided in hand with other education reform efforts, and schools to work programs and Maryland's school-performance assessments.

The Maryland service-learning program is now a potential model for other school systems and state educators. Although faced challenges as the first state to mandate service learning for graduation, we feel service learning is an integral part of public education to invite students to learn while serving their communities.

The authors work with the Ridge School of Technical Arts and the Cambridge Service Corps, respectively, both of which are housed at the Cambridge Rindge and Latin School in Cambridge, Mass.

This special Commentary report is one in a series that brings together leading thinkers and educators, policymakers, and others to focus attention and frame the debate on a key issue. The series is sponsored by a grant from the Philip Morris Companies Inc. The Philip Morris Education Program recognizes the critical role played by teachers by focusing on innovative teacher education and on increasing their awareness and influence in the classroom.