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Special Topics in Service Learning

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## Working at Learning

Education Week

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# COMMENTARY

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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?*

**T**he 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.

It's up to schools 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 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 stu-



dents' 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 a 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.

**F**raming the debate  
A Special Commentary Report

## 'Academics And Life'



By Samuel Halperin

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 service learning are integral parts of this rediscovery.

While there are differences among the three mini-movements, they share several important fundamentals: Young people prefer, are motivated by, and benefit from

active rather than passive learning environments. Various community institutions—families, employer workplaces, local government, nonprofit citizens' organizations—offer possibilities for powerful learning experiences. These structured experiences in the community can make real and meaningful the academic content of formal school-based learning. Practicing else-

where what one learns in school is the best way to enhance and reinforce classroom learning and to call it forth when it is needed in later life.

In the words of Hilary Pennington, the president of Jobs for the Future, the 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 apprenticeship experiences, 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-posing and -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. Their

philosophies approach young people as resources who are capable of contributing now, not merely in later life. Rather than regard students as helpless and empty vessels into whom teachers pour information, adults in experiential education see themselves as partners and guides, helping to produce healthy, self-affirming, and productive lifelong learners. Young people are also full partners, taking substantial personal



responsibility for directing their own learning. By helping young people grow through various forms of doing, these adults offer the essential respect that many of these youths find absent in their lives. Focusing on practical results and outcomes, experiential

## 'No Wonder Johnny Can't Read'



By Dani Hansen

Once again, we have a new federal education plan: the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994. This time, the plan is jointly funded by the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education and is heralded as the savior of American education. Advocates of this federal program claim that it is the remedy for all of society's ills, from poor citizenship and lazy or illiterate workers to spoiled and undisciplined children.

Champions of this plan have

marketed school-to-work programs as options to vocational education that are so terrific that "all students" should participate. They present success story after success story to prove their point. But, these stories are smoke and mirrors. After all, they are only anecdotes of recent collaborative school and community-business projects, not stories of the long-term impact such programs have had on participants' job placement and success. There is absolutely no evidence that school-to-work programs successfully prepare all schoolchildren to make significant—or even adequate—contributions to the workplace.

Not one student in the United States has completed a training program such as those outlined in the federal script, which requires that a student would have been counseled, during school time, from "the earliest possible age, and no later than 7th grade," on the career choices available to him.

Consider this: The student would have been trained in a curriculum that "integrated all academics with vocational skills" and taught in the "context of [his] future workplace."

This hypothetical school-to-work student would have been taught on the approved work site, as well as having his workplace academics or "applied" academics taught part-time at the school site. "School-based mentors" and "work-based mentors" would have counseled and guided the student successfully through a smooth transition between his "school-based learning" and his

"work-based learning." Just getting through the jargon would require a full day's work.

But there is no record of such a program having produced a skilled, responsible citizen who is a productive, contributing member of her community. Do we want our federal money going to an educational quick fix that has yet to be evaluated?

Advocates of school-to-work programs assume that every child—when placed in such a program—will achieve the outcomes intended for them. Will such a program work for all children? These anecdotes only account for children who have been educated within a traditional curriculum. Only when these students have mastered the necessary basics and have reached an age when they can begin to open their minds to their futures are they placed into a high school career-exploration program or a vocational program. Proponents cite these successes and proudly claim total credit for the potential achievements of all students—regardless of their age or whether they have mastered the basics. Anecdotal evidence of these successes has brought career-training programs to students as young as elementary age.

These "success stories" only prove what we have always known: If you give children a solid basic education in their younger years, then give them a quality vocational experience in their high school years, they will go on to become productive members of society.

Good teachers with a quality academic curriculum have been successfully producing good workers, good leaders, and good citizens for more than a century. They have accomplished this in all kinds of environments with all kinds of teaching tools.

Kindergarten teachers used to be able to use class time to teach the young minds in their class the alphabet, numbers, and simple arithmetic. Sadly, teachers at all grade levels face an increasingly serious time deficit. Much of the problem is due to programs, driven by social needs, that cut into academic class time. Time is the currency of education. The minutes a teacher spends on activities like AIDS awareness, career awareness, service learning, scoliosis checks, vision and hearing screenings, counselor inter-



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views, career fairs, and employer visits are minutes not spent teaching reading, writing, history, geography, math, and science. No wonder Johnny can't read. If our nation's children leave 1st grade unable to read, it makes little difference what they decide to be when they grow up, because their options will be as limited as their education.

Disruption of the curriculum is not the only problem with the school-to-work program. The federal program includes a list of mandates that would require nothing less than systemwide change in public education. One of these changes is in the district leadership. Most districts are led by locally elected boards. If local residents do not like the direction in which the district is going, they can elect a new board.

The law calls for a new leadership, called the "local partnership," to make the decisions. By federal mandate, the majority of this leadership body must consist of employers and labor-union representatives, not educators. It is this new local partnership that retrains teachers, sets curriculum, standards, benchmarks, and assessments, approves appropriate work sites, and negotiates contracts. In this mandated structure, with the local partnership retraining teachers, negotiating contracts, and setting curriculum, what is left for the site councils and school boards to do? And how does our community replace the local partnership if we don't like the direction they are taking our schools?

The proponents of this plan have indeed focused on a so-called national need. They have created an education urgency and come up with a quick-fix solution that puts them in control. Meanwhile, the Labor Department, businesses, and the labor unions will have a hand in defining curriculum, negotiating contracts, and, in essence, controlling education and the human capital that will be produced by our radically altered public schools. And all of this is being pulled off right under the nose of our elected officials. Why? Because this program, as a federal grant to the state, can be put in place without the oversight of elected officials, except the governor.

The reins of control, in this case and others, are slipping further and further from the schools and teachers. With programs like this one, teachers are losing control of how to spend their time in the classroom. More important, they are losing the creativity and authority to determine what the students need to progress and succeed. Let's get back to teachers and school administrators deciding what is best for their students' futures.

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learning leads young people toward competence, responsibility, and success. For the participating adults, such experiences bring great professional and personal satisfaction.

People do not learn solely from experience. (If we did, we would not repeat our mistakes so often!) What we do learn from is reflection on our experience, that is, integration of the new information with our previous learning, our personal values, and our life situation. When experience "fits" what is perceived to be important, useful, and valuable, this is true learning—not merely a rote exercise to pass an examination or other ephemeral hurdle. In other words, effective learning has to answer the student's inevitable question: "Why do I need to learn this?" Our usual answers won't cut it anymore: "You're going to need this someday," or "Learn it because I'm telling you it's important."

Many proponents of higher academic standards would motivate students by instituting "consequences," or sanctions for failing to master academic material. Undoubtedly, some students would work harder at their studies if, for example, college admission, student financial aid, or entry-level employment were made conditional upon an assessment of academic success in high school. Fear is a powerful motivator for some people. Few leaders today disagree with the need for students to achieve higher academic performance. As educators, though, we should strive for positive motivation in the form of lively learning, rather than depend primarily on fear of "consequences."

That is where service-learning, community-service, and school-to-work programs offer a marked advantage. When I observe students learning in a variety of well-structured experiential programs, I have been struck by the enthusiasm, even the joy, of these students. When asked what they learn in the workplace or in community service, young people will generally exclaim: "I make a difference." "People depend on me." "Now I understand why school studies are important." "Excellence counts in life."

But experiential education is not without its critics. In a trenchant assault on service learning, Chester E. Finn Jr. and Gregg Vanourek reveal that they have yet to reconcile experiential education with academic achievement. Writing in the October 1995 issue of *Commentary* magazine, they conclude:

"Most troubling ... is that our schools, which are performing so poorly in their core mission of transmitting basic skills and essential knowledge, are now diverting time, energy, and money to nonacademic matters."

Far from being a diversion from academic achievement, experiential educators believe that their applied methodologies advance effective academic learning. Yet, the critics' challenges must be addressed.

Too many promising education-reform movements bear out the adage, "Founded on a hunch, dismissed on a negative anecdote." Experiential educators must be able to show that what they are doing lies at the heart of effective learning. Until responsible research backs up anecdotal observation and conclusively

demonstrates that the experiential mini-movements can motivate many or most students to master "basic skills and essential knowledge" better than current practice, service-learning, community-service, and school-to-work strategies will remain beset by skepticism or under outright political assault.

The results of these programs speak for themselves. Whether bound for colleges or full-time workplaces after graduation, students are experiencing the relevance, the sense of connection, between academics and life beyond the classroom.

Youths who used to think of themselves as poor or average students have now decided they need and want further education. They have been turned on to the excitement of learning in the classroom—combined with relevant experience in the community or in a workplace.

Students in health sciences develop realistic plans for becoming registered nurses, physicians, and research scientists. Students in metal-working see themselves as future engineers, systems analysts, and geologists. One young woman studying to be a machinist says she has set her sights on no less than owning and managing the company in which she is apprenticing—and for that higher education is essential.

Success in learning is infectious.

*The author is the founder and co-director of the American Youth Policy Forum, a Washington-based professional-development organization for youth policymakers.*

# 'All Students Can Serve'



By Margaret A. O'Neill

Middle school students visit a senior citizens' home once a week to discuss with the residents historical events such as the Great Depression, World War II, and Watergate. The result is a vivid, firsthand account of history that their textbooks could never convey. The students also learn about communicating with hearing-impaired people and about the natural aging process. The seniors find companionship and make a contribution to students' learning. This is service learning.

High school students study botany to learn about various trees' nutritional needs and ecological value. They plant trees on the school property to replace vandalized ones planted years ago in memory of deceased students. This is service learning once again.

Schools can truly engage students in service to the community. As a matter 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 clearly compatible with the role of schools in our society. The mission of public education nationwide is similar to that of my state: "To continuously improve public education in Maryland so that each learner acquires the skills, knowledge, and values necessary to become a responsible citizen and enjoy a productive life." We are encouraging graduates of public schools to become responsible citizens.

Service learning is a process that inculcates the values and skills of good citizenship. By addressing community problems that students themselves identify, they get to know their communities—the people, the problems, and the way competing interests must be juggled. These activities are basic for citizens in any democracy. The framers of the Constitution believed that the health and longevity of our democracy would depend upon an informed and engaged citizenry. To that end, students must actively participate in their

communities, in addition to performing rigorous academic study.

A national survey of young people conducted last summer revealed that youths want to be involved in their communities. Ninety-five percent thought students should be required to serve as part of their schooling. And 75 percent said they do not serve because they don't know how or have not been asked. Service learning, which couples service to the community with preparation and reflection activities, unleashes the energy and idealism to make a difference in the community. Here, teachers' roles in service learning are especially important; in order for students to learn from their service, they must be able to prepare, then reflect and discuss their experiences.

A basic premise of service learning is that young people are a vast resource in our communities. Service learning gives them meaningful work and cultivates a sense of belonging. One state, Maryland, and 25 percent of all U.S. school districts have the stated expectation that youths can and should become involved citizens.

All students can serve. Each person can do something to care for his or her community and the people in it. Students help younger peers by tutoring, helping with homework, coaching little league teams, and assisting 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, like libraries, museums, and parks, are served by young people who help with special projects and everyday activities. The list is endless. Whether they have special needs or are at-risk, students serve their communities while they grow personally, socially, and intellectually.

In 1992, the Maryland board of education became the first in the country to require students to participate in a service-learning program in order to graduate. Starting with the class of 1997, a Maryland high school diploma will represent not only the achievement of academic requirements, but also the perfor-

formance of service learning. Both encourage students toward their highest potential.

Service learning is an integral part of Maryland's other statewide reform efforts. It provides opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning, achievements, and competence. Educators, too, have a chance to assess students' learning in authentic situations. Service learning affirms the value of learning from real, rather than vicarious or simulated, experiences. Finally, service learning is one viable way to engage the "whole village" in educating our children. Adult volunteers and supervisors at service organizations become, in essence, educators, serving as role models and providing guidance.

All 24 districts in Maryland have designed their own service-learning programs. To earn the superintendent's approval, such programs had to include developmentally appropriate preparation, action, and reflection, as well as 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 models, leadership, and resources for service learning. Over time, the districts and the state education department have together built consensus around good classroom practice and how to administer service learning on a statewide scale. Our practice has evolved and improved. We have documented what we have learned and are using these tools to evaluate and continuously improve service learning.

Another challenge facing 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, because it

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*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, is accepted or rejected on that basis rather than the educational process it is. The proponents have had to take time to educate the public, policymakers, and teachers about service learning.

Mandated service learning is controversial. Some people in the community confuse it with the "community restitution" that judges order criminals to perform. And it raises questions about the academic value of students' association with religious organizations, scouts, or other groups. In addition, some feel that the value of an individual's contribution is di-

minished 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.

Some teachers' resistance 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. Now that graduation for the first class with the service-learning mandate is just over a year away, a couple of school systems are scrambling 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 ser-

vice-learning programs. Maryland has also developed statewide program-improvement tools based on what teachers and administrators have learned. We are implementing service learning hand in hand with other education reform efforts, including school-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 education agencies. Although we 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. ■

## 'Community Problem-Solving 101'



By Adria Steinberg  
and John Shea

"Many of us don't realize how important it is to look around us once in a while and figure out what we can do to help the community, because basically it all comes back to us and our quest for success. And I must

admit I am one of those people. You don't really realize that working to improve things is what's gonna help keep you going down the road. So that's basically what I'm looking for: A method to keeping my mind open to the community and to achieve my goals in life."

A student wrote this essay in response to a recent assignment in a class called Community Problem-Solving 101. His request does not seem at all unreasonable: He wants his school to help him do well and do good. Those of us working in high schools know how difficult it is to help students reach either of these goals. Wouldn't it be at least twice as challenging to do both?

At the Rindge School of Technical Arts, the answer we have arrived at is a surprising no.

Few people will argue with the idea that students can contribute to their communities—and learn in the process—as long as the service-learning and school-to-work programs are executed well. In our struggle to increase the level of engagement of students in school, we have discovered the value of community exploration and public- or private-sector internships as contexts for real learning. Tearing down the walls between school and community makes it possible to lay groundwork both for authentic school-based projects and for community- or work-based projects that give students new reasons to engage in school.

For example, in the CityWorks program, freshman students select an aspect of life in their community that they would like to investigate. (Health, entertainment, and retail businesses were all topics of recent projects.) Working in small groups, they have several weeks to do research and field work, with the stipulation that most of the sites they visit must be within walking distance of the school. The project culminates with the group conducting a presentation containing their findings. These include descriptions of their sites, texts of interviews, photographs, and, in many cases, three-dimensional models.

The students then focus on neighborhoods of the city in the throes of revitalization and redevelopment efforts. Their projects involve a mixture of simulation, such as designs for and models of new buildings and businesses that they would like to see developed, and products with an immediate use to neighborhood

groups or agencies, such as T-shirts publicizing particular community-renewal efforts.

Because of the community-oriented nature of the work, both projects have had the unanticipated payoff of greater community interest in our program as a whole. Perhaps most significantly, the students' field-work functions as a natural outreach mechanism for finding community businesses and agencies that are willing to sponsor job-shadowing opportunities for our 10th-grade students as well as longer-term placements for older students.

We encourage students in their junior and senior years to participate in school-to-work transition and service-learning opportunities. One central dilemma in urban communities today is that an increasing number of students seem to be more engaged, hence more open to learning, in workplace and community settings than they are in the classrooms where they are expected to spend six hours each day. It is our task as educators, then, to find appropriate settings where adults are willing to be mentors to students and to do everything we can to enhance the learning potential of those sites.

In our school-to-work programs, the teacher works closely with work-site supervisors to structure a seminar at the work site during "work" time for students in similar placements, such as hospitals and other health settings. The seminar allows students to reflect on their work, to practice skills—particularly written and oral communication—that are vital to workplace success, and to learn more about all aspects of the industry in which they are working. At the school site, academic subjects like human anatomy and physiology are redesigned to emphasize the kinds of problems and tasks facing health practitioners.

Over the course of their internships, students carry out several projects that are jointly negotiated with supervisors and teachers. In order to figure out what they can do that will make a real contribution to the ongoing work of the site and have educative value for them, students must develop both self-knowledge and knowledge of the site.

In our Cambridge Service Corps program, a diverse team of juniors and seniors develop a shared vision for what our city ought to be, do a reality check of current needs, produce an inventory of local resources, decide on a target problem, and then organize a communitywide service project to address it. The year-long program makes up almost half the corps members' entire course load. The Cambridge Service Corps is unique; it is school-based and grounded in an academically rigorous curriculum. In this course, community projects are not seen as merely extensions or applications of the curriculum, or as an extracurricular afterthought; rather, community problem solving is the curriculum. The students' work leads them into the domains of social studies, language arts, and tech-



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nical arts, earning them credit in all three areas.

Although we have seen the value of our work-oriented and community-focused initiatives, it has been obvious to us from the start that we must move beyond inserting such initiatives, one by one, into the margins of the high school curriculum. Taken together, work-based learning and service learning frame a vision of a very different, and, we believe, ultimately more engaged and powerful kind of learning. In this model, students analyze and solve real problems that present themselves in communities and workplaces; teachers use these prob-

lems to provide their students with ongoing practice in doing projects and presentations and to lead students into important domains of discipline-based knowledge.

In preparing students for their future lives as community members and wage earners, some of the most important skills we can help them develop are the ability to assess real community needs and fashion responses to them; carry out complex, messy, multi-step projects; and communicate their ideas to relevant audiences.

Clearly, what we are talking about here goes beyond tinkering with the high school; it requires institutional change. This is more likely to come about when we recognize that school-to-work and service-learning programs are manifestations of the same basic educational ideas—that students learn better when they see the curriculum in action.

From a societal perspective, this type of education produces both the competent worker that a

healthy economy demands and the engaged citizen that a participatory democracy demands. From an individual perspective, it fosters both personal fulfillment in a meaningful vocation and a deeper sense of connection to one's community. Consequently, students instilled with an appreciation for the true value of education (namely, its positive application to creating ourselves and our world) graduate with more than a deep understanding of the world. They graduate knowing they have a purposeful role in it. ■

*The authors work with the Rindge 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 education policymakers to focus attention and frame the debate on a key issue. The series is being underwritten 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 programs and on recruiting more minorities into the profession.