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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.

Critics argue that teaching job skills and 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.
'Academics And Life'

The idea that effective and exciting learning can happen throughout the community, not just in the classroom, is well worth exploring. In many cases, community engagement and service learning are integral parts of this approach.

While there are some important differences among the three mini-movements, they share several fundamental features: Young people are motivated and engaged in authentic learning experiences. Those structured experiences in the community can make real and meaningful the academic content of formal school-based learning. Pronouncing else.

where what one learns in school is the best way to en-

hance and reinforce classroom learning and to call it for what it needs in the real world.

In the words of Hillary Pennington, the president of jobs for the Future, the Boston-based workforce-develop-ment group, "We see service learning as a core component of work-based learning which includes children's education that is not so narrow: that "all students" should participate. These present success stories, in short, to prove their point. But, these stories are smoke and mirrors. After all, they are only anecdotes of young, collaborative, school-based community and school-community projects: not stories of the long-term impact such programs have had on participants' job placements and success. There is absolutely no evidence that school-to-work programs have been successful. In fact, all school-to-work programs have been just as unsuccessful as the schools that have participated in them.

Champions of this plan have presented "school-to-work" programs as options to vocational education that are not as toxic as "all students" should participate. These present success stories, in short, to prove their point. But, these stories are smoke and mirrors. After all, they are only anecdotes of young, collaborative, school-based community and school-community projects: not stories of the long-term impact such programs have had on participants' job placements and success. There is absolutely no evidence that school-to-work programs have been successful. In fact, all school-to-work programs have been just as unsuccessful as the schools that have participated in them.

Not one student in the United States has completed a training program such as those seen in the federal script, which requires that a student have completed the script. During school time, from "the earliest possible time," these students have been taught that they are "too late" for "school," which is a sad choice available to them. Consider this: The student would have been trained in a school that "integrated all academics with vocational skills" and taught in the "context of his future workplace." This theoretical school is not a workplace, nor is it a workplace where students actually learn vocational skills. Students would have been taught outside the approved work site, as well as having their workplace classrooms 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.

One student's experience in this program has been highlighted in a recent newspaper article. "A school teacher who has been described as a "superstar" in the classroom has been forced to leave the classroom. This teacher was forced to leave the classroom. It seems that the school administration was not aware that they had a superstar in their midst. The teacher was forced to leave the classroom. It seems that the school administration was not aware that they had a superstar in their midst. The teacher was forced to leave the classroom. It seems that the school administration was not aware that they had a superstar in their midst.

Advocates of school-to-work programs assume that every child should have access to such a program. Will such a program solve the problems of the school system? This program only accounts for a small percentage of children who have been educated within a traditional curriculum. Only when these students have completed the necessary boxes and have reached an age when they can begin to open their minds to their future, will a program such as this be effective. Proponents cite these successes and proudly claim total credit for the potential achievements of all students—regardless of their race 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 educa-

tion, they will do well in school. But does society benefit when they are forced to leave the classroom? They have accomplished this in all kinds of environments with all kinds of teaching tools.

Educators used to be able to use class time to teach the young minds in their class the alphabet, numbers, and simple arithmetic. They have accomplished this in all kinds of environments with all kinds of teaching tools.

But students were used to spending time on activities that were meaningful to them. Sad! Studies have shown that the best time to teach the young minds in their class, the alphabet, numbers, and simple arithmetic, is during the school day. Time is the currency of education. The minutes a teacher spends on activities that are meaningful to students, not just academic tasks, are the key to increasing their self-esteem and self-confidence. In many cases, the time spent on these activities is not accounted for in the school day.

view, career fairs, and employer visits are minutes not spent teaching reading, writing, history, geography, math, or 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 government includes a list of mandates that will 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. This mandate means that it is impossible for teachers, sets curriculum, standards, benchmarks, and assessments, approves appropriate work sites, and negotiates contracts. In this mandated structure, with the local government retaining all contracts, 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.

The author is the state chairman of Idaho Citizens for Quality Education and the chairwoman of the state affiliate of the Eagle Forum, an Alton, Ill.-based conservative advocacy group.
People do not learn solely from experience. (If we did, we would never repeat our mistakes so often.) What we do learn from is reflection: reflection on the 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 relevant, this newly acquired knowledge is more likely to be remembered than information presented in a more abstract way. In this way of learning, the student is in control of the learning process. Students are able to focus on the important parts of the new information and to go through the learning process at their own pace. The student is also able to reflect on the information they have learned and to evaluate its usefulness.

All Students Can Serve

By Margaret A. O'Neill

Middle school students visit a "senior citizens" home once a week to discuss current events with the residents. Historical events such as the Great Depression, World War II, and Watergate are discussed as part of the residents' lives. The students also engage in conversation with people of all ages and backgrounds, and learn about the natural aging process. The students develop a deep appreciation for life and the value of learning from the experiences of others. The Service-Learning Association provides a platform for students to learn about the importance of service and the value of learning from the experiences of others.

Demonstrates that the experiential mini-movements can motivate many or most students to master basic skills and essential knowledge, and to develop problem-solving, service-learning, community-service, and school-to-work strategies will remain based on the importance of understanding the role of democratic citizens.

The results of those efforts will be self-evident. Whether bound for college or full-time work after graduation, students are experiencing the relevance of the field. Beyond the classroom.

Youths who use think of themselves as poor or average students have new decided they need and want further education. They have been turned on to the excitement of learning in the classroom—conversely, to the excitement of learning in the classroom.
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.

The students' projects are part of "the reform of the month" and 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, the community is focusing on ways 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 in hand with other education reform efforts, such as 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 faced with 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.

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**Community Problem-Solving 101**

By Adria Steinberg and John Shea

Many of us realize how important it is to look around us, join in, and figure out what we can do to help the community in which we live. Sometimes the issue is difficult, and when it is, it comes back to us again and again, until we find a way to make a difference.

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 one of these goals. Wouldn't it be at least twice as challenging to do both?

At the Ridge School of Technical Arts, the answer we have arrived at is surprising. 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. Drawing down the walls between school and community makes it possible to lay groundwork for authentic school-based projects and for community- or work-based projects that give students a chance to engage in a process.

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.) After some research, the students spend 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 a public presentation and a written report. The students' work leads them to the definition of social studies, language arts, and technical arts, earning them hands-on experience 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. To this end, our students are involved in school-to-work projects and in the long-term placement of older students.

We encourage students in their junior and senior years to participate in school-to-work arrangements 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 the 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 students to develop visions for a career as a doctor, nurse, police officer, or business executive. We use this process to provide education and training in the workplace and community settings. The students are motivated to learn on their own, 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 professionals.

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 their current position will be, they spend time getting to know the school or workplace. In the ongoing work of the site and have educational value for them, students must develop both self-knowledge and knowledge of the site.

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, and then organize and carry out a comprehensive community service effort. We believe that students learn better when they see the curriculum in action.

From a societal perspective, this type of program 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 and a 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 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.

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This special Commentary report is one in a series that brings together leading thinkers, educators, policymakers, and community leaders to focus attention and frame the debate on a key issue. The series is written by a group of experts commissioned by a grant from the Philip Morris Companies Inc. The Philip Morris·Education Program recognizes the critical role played by teachers and educators in innovative teacher education programs to enriching the quality of life in all classrooms.