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Becoming People Who Find Solutions

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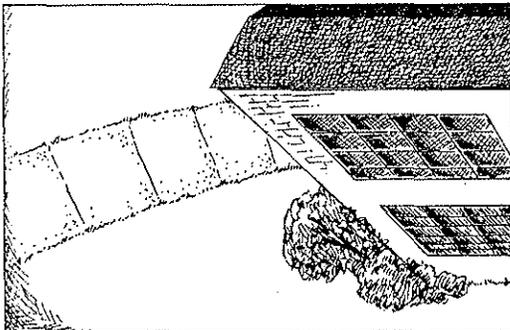
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mates—not just for the teachers. They pick their own topics and work on new angles and directions, getting suggestions from their peers, often in small groups, “to write the paper only you can write.” Discussions are planned but not structured. Often, we begin with student reactions and comments into which we weave our lesson plan. Students participate without raising hands, paying special attention to each other, sharing deeply personal and important matters about families and fears, using books like *Beloved* and *Crime and Punishment* as resources.

We share power with students in the most sensitive areas. Students who fail to perform academically or who are guilty of breaking a rule are sent to the Review Committee, composed of eight students and one staff member, to discuss the problem. Ultimately, only this committee has the power to decide whether a student should remain in S.W.S. Often, adults worry that a student-dominated committee will be too lenient. On the contrary, students feel that S.W.S. is their school and are offended by “slackers,” liars, and con artists. Over the decades, they have been the ones to recommend expulsion of one or two students a year, despite pleas for leniency from some staff members.

After our collective 40 years in S.W.S., we feel our democratic school makes education collaborative, honest, dynamic, and academically rigorous. Students continue to feel S.W.S. is their school long after they graduate. They tell us that S.W.S.:

- Taught them to think and question. Over and over, students say, “I was more vocal in college [because of my experience at S.W.S.].” “I wasn’t intimidated by my professors.”
- Gave them a more open mind. “S.W.S. opened my mind to students who are not traditionally academic. S.W.S. gave me the opportunity to see them shine.”
- Prepared them academically. “Downstairs classes teach you how to get by in the real world, but S.W.S. classes show you how things could and should be. . . . They raise your expectations.”
- Inspired them to seek and create democratic communities.



Our democratic school works; students tell us so, eloquently and often. In the words of one former student: “I began to sense the value of a single human being and each person’s responsibilities to each other and to the world. I was exposed to the issues and social concerns that most of the ‘world out there’ appeared to be ignoring. This sense of belonging and sense of activism are positive ways to fill the needs of high school students: needing truth, needing friends, needing places to put their incredible energy. S.W.S. gave me the knowledge that I have a voice. It didn’t give me that voice, but I would go from there to the places that would help, not hinder, me. S.W.S. gave me the inner authority to strive to become an independent and free-thinking person.”

‘Becoming People Who Find Solutions’



By Eli J. Segal

The author is the assistant to President Clinton for national service and the chief executive officer of the Corporation for National Service.

I asked a young boy in Maine why he thought spending six hours a month in a homeless shelter was an important part of his 5th-grade lessons. “Because I used to think that homeless people were really different and frightening,” he said. “Now I know that a lot of homeless people are like me inside, but things didn’t work out for them somehow. I’m learning about what they need.”

I talked with a high school student in Washington who said the service experience she had through school shaped her professional goals. She told me that serving in an inner-city health clinic led her to focus her pre-med education on becoming a doctor who works with the underserved. In her view, that’s the ultimate contribution she can make to society.

These two young people are what national service is all about—involving Americans in addressing the critical needs of their communities and, ultimately, in caring for the well-being of all of our nation’s citizens.

When President Clinton announced his vision of national service to America, he described it as a way to strengthen the country’s ethic of service. To that end, he pointed to the need to get people interested in their communities at a young age and said he would encourage public schools and universities to involve students in service as part of their education.

Making and keeping commitments to people, learning to work with and care for people from very different backgrounds, understanding how to determine and affect a community’s quality of life—all of these are part of citizenship. Taking part in their communities helps young people expand their world and take on responsibility for the fate of not only themselves but also their fellow citizens. It helps them become people who find solutions to problems rather than people who wait for others to respond.

Today, the President’s national service initiative includes not only AmeriCorps, which rewards full-time service with help paying for higher education, but also Learn and Serve America, a grants program that supports K-12 and higher-education-based service across the country.

Why connect public schools to national service? Because both aim to make the world a better place. And both provide youths with tools to build productive and meaningful lives.

The integration of education, service, and citizenship into a curriculum is known as service-learning. Service-learning involves students in service experiences that complement their classroom studies and foster understanding of citizenship and social responsibility.

Some people question whether service-learning detracts from the primary mission of public education, that of teaching academic skills. On the contrary, service-learning has proved to actually increase students’ academic performance. For example, following a service-learning program that combined science lessons with meeting local environmental needs, students placed in the 97th percentile in science knowledge and were the first group of Indiana students ever to unanimously choose science as their favorite subject. This school is in a county that previously ranked lowest on the state’s education-attainment scale. In another example, 32 studies on the effects of students tutoring others show that the young people involved in this service performed better on exams related to the subject they taught than control groups of students who were not involved.

Along with the positive boost in academic performance, there are a number of reasons for encouraging service in schools:

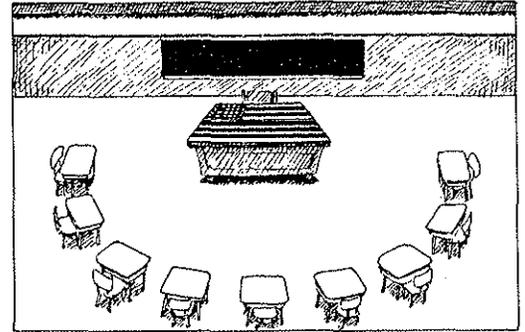
- Service-learning allows students to make sense of how skills learned in school relate to the real world. For example, when math students develop plans for turning a vacant lot into a neighborhood park, they have to measure areas and understand spatial relationships to draw up blueprints; when budgeting for supplies, they rely on basic skills: addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. When foreign-language students translate tourist information guides for the local chamber of commerce, they test their proficiency. And, when students of any subject tutor peers, younger students, or community residents, they must perfect their understanding of concepts to articulate them to others.

- Service-learning also increases students’ interest in school. Research shows that college students who do community service are more likely to finish their education than those who don’t. Students at risk of dropping out of high school have told me that since they’ve been involved in their communities, they haven’t missed a day of school. They tell me their formal education has more meaning. And they tell me about another reason for not missing class: doing so would let down the people they serve.

- Through service-learning programs, young people learn how to work with many types of people to solve problems. The ability to work among diverse groups of people is important—not only for the communities in which they serve but for

our increasingly interconnected world.

Traditional academic programs have always sought to teach the basic knowledge necessary for active, productive citizenship. Service-learning goes a step further: By giving young people actual opportunities to serve and be viewed as valuable members of their communities, service-



learning provides not only the tools of citizenship but also the will and desire to put them to productive use.

Service-learning gets young people involved in their communities and instills in them a sense of social responsibility they will carry throughout their lives.

‘Democracy Is Not Always Convenient’

By Deborah Meier



The author is a fellow at the Annenberg National Institute for National School Reform. This essay is adapted from her recent book, The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America From a Small School in Harlem, Beacon Press, 1995.

There is a radical—and wonderful—new idea in the air these days in at least some of our public conversations: the idea that every citizen is capable of the kind of intellectual competence previously attained by only a small minority of citizens. Only after I had begun to teach 30 years ago did public rhetoric begin to give even lip service to the notion that all children could and should be inventors of their own theories, critics of other people’s ideas, makers of their own personal marks on the world. It’s an idea with revolutionary implications. If we take it seriously.

Taking it seriously means accepting public responsibility for the shared future