Special Topics, General

4-19-1995

Becoming People Who Find Solutions

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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 for national and high school 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, they apply concepts of translation to their work.

- 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 us they're more likely to continue in school once involved in their communities, they haven't missed a day of school. They tell us about the opportunities for not missing class: doing so would let down the people they serve.

- Through service-learning programs, young people learn to work with people from many types of people to solve problems. The ability to work across diverse groups of people is important—not only for the communities in which they serve but for learning provides not only the tools of citizenship but also the will and desire to put them to productive use.

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

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