Becoming People Who Find Solutions

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of high school students: needing truth, and free-thinking.

Their incredible energy.

Knowledge that I have a voice.

Hinder, me.

Opened my mind to students who are not graduate. They tell the issues with authority to strive to become an independent thinker in the real world, but some classes show you how things could and should be. They gave me the opportunity to see them.

Taught them to think and question.

Prepared them academically.

"S.W.S. students are different and memorable. 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 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 for public and private universities to provide 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 the 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 combined science lessons with real-world 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 typically 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 design 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 researchers that their involvement in their communities, they haven't missed a day of school. They tell their formal education has more meaning. And they tell me about their new vision 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 taught 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 gives young people involved in their communities and instills in them a sense of social responsibility they will carry throughout their lives.