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THE AMERICAN PROSPECT

The Community Is Their Textbook: Maryland's Experiment with Mandatory Service for Students

SUZANNE GOLDSMITH NOVEMBER 19, 2001

At its best, service learning enriches both students and their communities. But creating good programs isn't easy.

Not long ago I asked Rudy, a 17-year-old high school junior I tutored in a neighborhood teen center, how he planned to perform the hundred hours of community service now required for high school graduation in Washington, D.C. Rudy said he would probably sign up for a summer jobs program cleaning up his neighborhood. If he waives the pay, he told me, the work will count as community service.

Rudy could do worse. His block needs sprucing up and he may take pride in doing something that benefits his own neighbors. Yet he will work alongside kids his own age who are getting paid for the same job. When the streets are dirty again in a few weeks, will Rudy feel like the responsible citizen the service requirement aims to make of him? More likely, he will feel like a chump.

During the many years that Congress debated national service before creating AmeriCorps in 1993, the specter of a civil draft overshadowed discussion of what service programs and their participants might accomplish. As a voluntary program that gets ten applicants for every opening, AmeriCorps does not raise the issue of coercion. Mandatory service is alive and well, however, in high schools across the country. The National Information Center for Service-Learning in St. Paul,

Minnesota, estimates that in 1993 more than a million high school students performed service through their school. Many of these students volunteer, but in a growing number of school districts, just as in D.C., serving the community is required for high school graduation. These programs have yet to catch the national media's eye, but they are sparking controversies in school districts across the country.

In Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, three high school students, all active in the community, refused to report their service efforts in fulfillment of a 50-hour requirement and sued the school board on the grounds that the requirement violated the constitutional prohibition of slavery. After they lost their case and the Supreme Court declined to hear an appeal, the schools refused the students their diplomas. In Chapel Hill, North Carolina, resentment over a service requirement runs deeper. Two students who filed suit to overturn the requirement have become heroes to many of their classmates. The school service coordinator resigned last fall, citing pressure from the lawsuit, and even reported receiving anonymous hate mail.

It's tempting to dismiss such resistance as either fringe libertarianism or just plain adolescent laziness. Schools, after all, require all kinds of things, from algebra to gym, and in most cases the service requirements amount to 12 to 25 hours a year--roughly the time required to write one or two research papers. But the protest of students like Aric Herndon, 14, one of the plaintiffs in the Chapel Hill case, resonate with seriousness. "It's not that I don't want to do volunteer work," Herndon told the *Raleigh News and Observer*. Indeed, Herndon is an Eagle Scout who has volunteered to build split-log benches for a school nature trail. "But when you're forced to do it, it's not a good thing. There's no heart in it."

Do school service requirements really destroy the virtues they are supposed to encourage? Or are they, as their proponents claim, an innovative way to instill values and citizenship in a generation of Americans said to be thin in both? What kinds of programs actually achieve valuable results? To answer these questions, I set out to examine more closely the school service programs in Maryland, the only state with a statewide service requirement.

AN EARLY START

The Maryland program did not come about quickly or easily. The original proposal was opposed by 23 out of 24 county school boards, the state teachers' union, the student representative to the Board of Education, and the Maryland Association of Student Councils. But after negotiation, a revised bill passed in 1992. The schools began phasing in the requirement last year. Under the law, Maryland school districts may choose between a simple 75-hour requirement (to be completed sometime between grades 6 and 12) and development of a district-wide alternative plan to incorporate service into the regular curriculum. Twenty-one of the state's 24 districts have chosen the second option.

Some districts have devised elaborate and substantive plans that begin as early as kindergarten. The success of an elementary school service program in Hebbville, Maryland, illustrates how properly administered service programs can accomplish two basic goals: teaching students about their communities, and providing those communities with valuable (and otherwise unavailable) services.

My visit to Hebbville begins with teacher Judy O'Connell's third-grade class, which every other week spends a morning visiting with residents of a local nursing home. While the children provide the residents with needed stimulation and a sense of being cared for, the act of reading aloud to a rapt audience improves the children's reading skills--and many of the seniors delight in helping with the hard words. The program not only encourages empathy, tolerance, and responsibility, but also strengthens the more basic learning skills that will help the students in the rest of their academic pursuits.

What makes O'Connell's program a success is its breadth. It extends well beyond the activity itself, immersing the students in both "preparation" and "reflection" sessions, as the emerging service pedagogy refers to them. Preparation in this case focuses primarily on helping students understand the aging process. On the day of my first visit, several fourth graders--veterans of O'Connell's program last year--are visiting the class to help prepare the third graders for their service experience. A boy named Trevor addresses a small group. He plays a short tape recording of garbled sounds, like a radio that is picking up more than one station. Then he asks

the students about what they learned from the recording. They are, of course, confused; one says she felt as if she were deaf. "That's right," says Trevor. "That's what it's like for old people sometimes. They can't hear. If this was a real emergency, and there was a big storm coming, and you couldn't hear, how would you feel?"

Trevor and the other fourth graders are testimony to the project's impact. They carry themselves with dignity and listen carefully to the questions and concerns of the younger children. During a spirited panel session, they offer some surprisingly cogent summaries of the project. "I learned that it's fun making other people smile and be happy," says one boy. "And if you do more of it, other people will do it too and we won't have so many crimes and we will have a better community."

The third graders respond. When they board the bus for their first visit to Meridian Nursing Center, they already feel warmly toward their elderly partners. Shyness quickly dissolves into enthusiasm upon arrival, and during the "oral reflection" session afterwards, O'Connell gleans from a group conversation that her program has succeeded at least in encouraging more understanding and developing self-esteem. "In my journal I wrote that I was gonna be scared," says Matthew, "but it was fun and she said I was a good reader and a good student. . . . It felt good reading to them because they listened."

Subsequent evidence of the project's impact arrives in the parent evaluations at year's end. No lawsuits here--the responses are positively glowing. "It gives my child a sense of giving and sharing." "It makes them aware of different backgrounds and cultures other than their own." "It will definitely improve [my son's] reading skills." "You are producing children who will be ready to be better parents, teachers, spouses, employees, etc., than our generation has been."

FRONTLINE DUTY

Of course, those responses are also emblematic of the other factor reinforcing O'Connell's success. The parents in Hebbville, a predominantly black middle-class suburb of Baltimore, are engaged in their students' schooling and reinforce

O'Connell's character lessons at home. The challenge is more daunting by the time Bob Black sees kids at Baltimore's Harbor City Learning Center. Harbor City is a school for students who have failed, been expelled, or been dropped from the rolls for poor attendance. Good citizenship is not the first issue here. The emphasis is on teaching the skills that many of these students need right away to be good workers and parents.



Not surprisingly, the results are mixed. Black says service-learning reaches many students who have not responded well in traditional classroom settings, and he is certainly correct. Performing valuable functions in hospitals, schools, and shelters boosts the students' self-esteem and ignites their thinking about possible careers. It also teaches how to satisfy basic requirements of the workplace such as timeliness, appropriate attire, and professional etiquette. Black's program is fairly rigorous--excused from school once a week to perform their service, students are required to make up the day's work--but the students respond. "I can't emphasize enough how important this is that a young person walk into a class with an idea that they can have success," says Black. "We use [service learning] to get their feet walking again in education after they've been laid up with an academic accident."

The experiences of students like Tridonna Banks, 17, lend support to this claim. A long record of truancy sent Tridonna to Harbor City, and she confesses she selected the service-learning class to "do something different instead of just going to school every day." Yet when I visit Tridonna in the first-grade classroom where she works as an assistant, she seems an attentive instructor in a position of some responsibility. Mrs. Gilliam, her teacher, is pleased with the arrangement, which she says makes an "amazing difference." Tridonna "is able to do the one-on-one repetition that certain children need and I don't always have time to provide . . . and she provides a different kind of presence. They look up to her. They want her attention. And because her age is closer to theirs, they can sense that being successful isn't that far away."

Tridonna, meanwhile, absorbs lessons she can take home to her two-year-old boy. As a young teenage mother, Tridonna worries about her parenting skills and studies Mrs. Gilliam intently. "I am learning to be more patient with him," Tridonna says of her boy. "I used to get upset a lot. She [Mrs. Gilliam] tries to be more firm with them. She doesn't really have to raise her voice." When Tridonna spent many hours teaching a young girl having trouble with the alphabet, she started teaching her son to read, too. The girl, Mrs. Gilliam reports, now knows ten letters--"for her, a big improvement." As for Tridonna's two-year-old son, "He's up to E," Tridonna says proudly.

The program, however, can be too ambitious for its own good. Baltimore's Liberty Medical Center, for instance, allows students from Harbor City to enroll in an apprenticeship program that offers career counseling, "image awareness" seminars, mentoring, and other services. "We have a need to go further than just being a place for young people to do their community service," explains Barbara Swann, director of the hospital's Volunteer and School Partnership Program. "They think they're just coming to do their community-service hours, but once they're here I've got them and I grab them and I can work with them and try to mold them. Because many of our young people, their self-esteem is just about zero."

It all sounds sensible enough. When I visit 18-year-old Dominique Wright at her service-learning job at the hospital, I find her at the "life skills" seminar. Along with 25 other young black students, she is engrossed by a dynamic young speaker who speaks in the familiar tongue of the street and presents a lesson that moves seamlessly from virginity and venereal disease to black pride. His straight talk seems to be hitting home with Dominique and the others. Yet with all the image-awareness and self-esteem classes, Dominique has precious little time left over for actual service, which might help build self-esteem the old-fashioned way, by helping her earn it. When Dominique finally gets to her post in ambulatory surgery, where she prepares patients for procedures by taking their vital signs, she relishes the chance to do meaningful work. "You can see that with or without you they would get the job done, but the people you work with make you feel important anyway. They give you a wide range of responsibilities."

Another problem with Harbor City's program is all too familiar. Bob Black must keep tabs on 22 students in individual service placements while maintaining a full load of academic courses. Inevitably, some kids fall through the cracks. One student with whom I had an appointment not only didn't show at her service duty; it turned out she she hadn't been there in weeks. Her supervisor thought the program had ended.

The problem isn't Black or the program's design. It's the lack of resources. Learn and Serve, a component of the federal national service program, offers schools money to help cover costs of school service-learning programs, and many use the grants to free teachers from other responsibilities to oversee service. But with only \$50 million appropriated this year, Learn and Serve doesn't go far.

FROM ASSIGNMENT TO INVOLVEMENT

Insufficient resources are not a problem in Maryland's more affluent districts, where some teachers are making more ambitious attempts to use service as a means for teaching other parts of the curriculum. But even these schools display some of the same problems that plague Harbor City. When the service itself is a challenging and productive activity, it instills in students a real fire for learning. But when service amounts to busywork, it becomes just another classroom assignment.

I found an example of the latter in a farm community. Joey Hoffman, a former Peace Corps volunteer and a high school English teacher in Middletown, works community service into her English courses. She has students read texts that can spark discussion of social issues and then asks them to plan and implement a small-scale service project. Students in Hoffman's class have planted trees and acted as escorts to disabled people; others have simply made posters to encourage recycling. The experience can be more inspiring for some than others.

But in a more structured elective service project, Hoffman can do more. In her elective service-learning class, which requires good grades and teacher recommendations, students tutor other students. The first year, 11 students signed

up; two years later, there are 75. By now nearly a quarter of the students in the school have taken the class, and that success may be promoting a culture that encourages involvement in volunteer service. Last year students at Middletown High School started the school's first community-service club, with members required to participate in ongoing service. Today, the club has a membership of 130.

At Western Heights Middle School in Hagerstown, that culture has already taken root. Seventh-grade science teacher Ellen Hayes and social studies teacher Pat Bratcher have joined forces to develop projects that touch on both their subject areas. This year, their students are working on an environmental unit that began when Hayes stumbled upon an opportunity to get free maps detailing local watershed areas. After studying the maps, students went out to look at a creek near the school and learned to take water samples and test for pollutants. Soon they were testing all the streams in the area, tracing the water's path from landlocked Hagerstown to the Chesapeake Bay. In the process, they learned about seepage and dumping, the role of wetlands in purifying the water table, and current efforts to clean up Chesapeake Bay. They applied to the Chesapeake Bay Trust for scholarships that would allow them to make a weekend trip to an island in the bay to get a firsthand look at the fish and bird habitats affected by pollution. For many of them, it was the first time they had seen the ocean.

Afterward, the students took on a missionary zeal. They petitioned the city council for permission to paint notices on the storm drains around town: "Don't Dump-- Chesapeake Bay Drainage." They decided to convert a muddy holding pond behind the school into a wetlands area. They also scripted their own demonstration about the impact of human activities on water quality over history and began making presentations to other students and civic groups in town.

"We've seen enormous development of citizenship skills," says Pat Bratcher. "They're like little detectives. 'This is a problem; how can we fix it?'" What makes this unit even more remarkable, however, is that in addition to learning environmental stewardship and social cooperation, students are increasing their knowledge in geography, biology, government, and other areas. In Hagerstown, the school district's service-learning plan integrates so much service into academic

classes that students complete the 75-hour requirement before they get to high school. When I tell these children about the lawsuits in North Carolina and New York, they're surprised. "Schoolwork is slavery," says Matt. "This is fun."

LOBBYING 101

Still, for all of their enthusiasm, the students in Hagerstown have stumbled upon what may yet prove to be the thorniest controversy surrounding mandatory service. Exposing students to problems in the community inevitably politicizes them. Often, as in Bratcher's class, they want to act on those concerns. But what happens when the students want to count those activities as their service? Who decides when it is acceptable?

Maryland's service-learning curriculum is fairly vague on the topic, condoning a wide range of political projects. It describes advocacy, or civic action, as "the work of citizenship," and includes in its definition community organizing and lobbying the government. "Young people can be very effective at this kind of civic action, especially if they are working on a cause they and the community feel is very important," the guide says.

But a close reading of the guide itself suggests where problems may arise. Describing possible advocacy projects to combat illiteracy, it proposes, among other things, lobbying the city council or state legislature for more funds for schools. No doubt this would please teachers and school administrators, and it may well be a worthy cause. What would taxpaying parents have to say, though, when they showed up at a city council meeting and found their sons and daughters leading a protest? Would they have a right to object?

What's disturbing is that the authors' thinking on the perils of school-sponsored political activity is conspicuously naive. My brush with educators--admittedly an unscientific sample--turned up an unsettling lack of self-awareness about how the causes they perceive to be "good" might not seem that way to everybody. Many had searched their souls to decide how they should respond if students asked to receive service credit for advocacy on behalf of causes that would be considered

"conservative"--working against abortion, for instance. Few, however, had raised similar questions about student advocacy for liberal causes.

There's no easy answer. Lawmakers can't simply limit advocacy to campaigns of universal appeal, for even consensus around the most innocuous causes breaks down when you get to specifics. Sure, everybody wants to protect the environment, and it's great to teach children about their ecosystem. But what happens when a class decides to picket a pollution-spewing plant that happens to employ one of the students' parents? Should projects sponsored by churches be included? What if they involve religious proselytizing? (Most schools say no.) What about work on political campaigns? (Policies vary.) Civil disobedience?

Precisely to avoid this problem, Congress expressly excluded lobbying from the list of jobs that participants in AmeriCorps could perform. Because AmeriCorps participants are paid, they are properly held to the same standards as government employees with regard to lobbying activities. But since high school service is specifically concerned with developing civic virtue, applying the same formula seems a bit odd.

A more farsighted answer to this sticky problem would be to fling the doors a lot farther open. The real danger of mandatory service-learning lies not in forcing students to donate their time to helping meet local needs, but in allowing school officials broad discretion to decide where and how they should do so. Better to let students decide. Teachers' emphasis should be on encouraging students to develop their critical thinking skills by gathering lots of information on all sides of an issue before taking a stand. They can best help students learn from service by refusing to settle for knee-jerk advocacy and making students support their positions on the causes they choose to espouse. Then service-learning will produce real citizens.

It's important to realize that such an approach to student advocacy might endanger existing support for service-learning in schools. Students will inevitably seek credit for internships with the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (which is, after all, an IRS-accredited, tax-exempt charity). The attention given to a student who is outraged because the schools will not give her credit for her work lobbying against abortion rights is nothing compared to the

outcry that would ensue if a school did grant her credit. Ditto for a student (this is a real case) who seeks credit for time he spent picketing against gay rights. Communities will struggle hard with these issues. But the classroom discussions will stimulate just the kind of civic education that students ought to have.

MAKING SERVICE WORK

Full compliance with Maryland's service requirement is still a long way away. Marilyn Smith, director of the Governor's Commission on Service, says that when she travels to outlying rural areas to talk about the plan, she still sometimes encounters principals and teachers who are unaware of the law. Fireworks are likely in 1997, when schools will begin denying diplomas to students who have not fulfilled the requirement. In the meantime, we can draw a few conclusions.

For starters, the most ambitious aspect of the Maryland program, its goal of integrating service across the curriculum, is promising but difficult to implement. Educators seeking to make their subjects more immediate, relevant, and engaging should relish--and try to replicate--the success of such projects as the environmental unit that led Hagerstown children to build their own wetlands. But half-hearted efforts to blend service with academics will likely result in activities that are a waste of time. Real academic service learning will require extensive teacher training and considerable commitment from school districts. Maryland is now moving to include service learning in the curriculum at state teachers' colleges, but it will take time before teachers learn how to run service learning well.

In the meantime, schools can increase students' civic awareness and enthusiasm about community participation with far more modest efforts and without the crutch of coercion. One elective service-learning class, taught by a creative and enthusiastic teacher, can do much to increase the entire student body's interest in community service. The Middletown High School tutoring class shows how students can find valuable service opportunities without even leaving the school. If every high school in the nation offered just one elective service-learning course (with a dedicated teacher leading the way), the increase in student service

activity--and, I suspect, related increases in everything from community recycling participation to voter registration among 18-year-olds--would be exponential.

Educators are not the only ones who can support such efforts. By making it clear that past participation in community service is a valued credential, colleges and employers can do much to encourage the expansion of student service efforts. And community nonprofits can encourage service learning by developing volunteer placements that are appropriate and interesting for school-aged youth.

Reassigning teachers is costly. But policymakers need to recognize that while community service learning has promise as a vehicle for reinvigorating education and countering civic apathy among youth, it won't work without a commitment of time and money. Schools can't place students in community service internships during the school day unless a teacher has time to oversee their work. Even in schools where service assignments are carried out after school and on weekends, someone must be available to develop placements, communicate with students' supervisors in the field, troubleshoot, and handle students' questions and concerns. If AmeriCorps survives the Republicans' budget-cutting fervor, national service participants might effectively fill this role.

Maryland's experience shows that a statewide service requirement can work to get the ball rolling at the local level. But the requirement should apply to schools, not to students. A more effective regulation would require schools to develop voluntary service-learning courses and to provide them with funding keyed to the numbers of students who elect to enroll. Teachers could compete for the opportunity to receive training in service-learning methods, and get extra compensation for passing on the training to other teachers in their school.

Finally, schools need to stop worrying about defining service. Only by wending their way through the tricky issues that any engagement with community problems presents will students truly learn from service. The more direct confrontation students have with community needs, the more information they will gather to help them make decisions and choices--and the less vulnerable they will be to indoctrination by teachers, nonprofit scam artists, or radio talk-show hosts.

A couple of months after our conversation about community service, Rudy--the student I tutored--quit the after-school program to take a part-time job at Boston Chicken. I dropped by to see him at work and found him wrapping brownies, looking smart and cheerful in his new uniform. But within a month, he had been laid off. The manager encouraged him to keep calling in case a slot became available, but after a couple of tries he gave up.

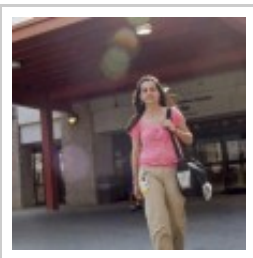
He still hasn't fulfilled the community service requirement, although he did work a day for pay in the street-cleaning program. He wanted the money for a haircut. "It was boring," he says of the cleanup work. He doesn't want to rejoin the tutoring program, either. He hangs out at home, watching TV. And his grades, never great, are getting worse. He's probably at risk of dropping out of school.

I can't help wondering what might happen if his teachers were challenging him to do something useful, rather than trying to keep him busy with homework worksheets. It's good to be needed--I felt the sting when Rudy stopped coming to me for tutoring. What if Rudy were needed somewhere each day, as Tridonna Banks is needed in her first-grade classroom in Baltimore? At its essence, service learning has the power to help students learn that each person in our society is needed--and that what they have to offer counts. For Rudy, and for countless others, it's a lesson that can't come a moment too soon.

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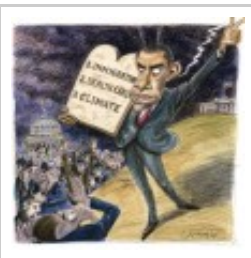
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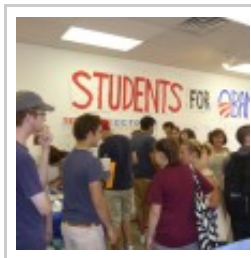
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