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*Feature*

# Community Service: Mandatory or Voluntary?

**School districts struggle to find the best approach for bringing a real-world aspect to learning** by DIANE LOUPE

Nearly 840 miles apart, high school juniors in Jefferson Parish, La., and Chicago faced the same pressing deadline and graduation requirement.

Students in both public school systems had to perform some sort of service to the community to earn a diploma. In Chicago, students had to complete 40 hours of service. In Jefferson Parish, 60 hours were expected of each student. In both systems, the class of 2001 was to be the first to come under the new requirement.

But before the 1999-2000 school year was over, one system (Jefferson) had revoked its policy under pressure from educators who viewed the service requirement as competing with academics. The other district (Chicago) has a successful program up and running with thousands of participating students. Together, the case histories of Chicago and Jefferson Parish offer a sober reality check for school systems contemplating mandatory community service for graduation.

Their disparate experiences illustrate the successes and failures of school systems nationwide that have embraced civic responsibility by requiring students to volunteer in their community. Some districts have done this by mandating that students complete their service as a prerequisite to graduation, with administrators and teachers keeping track of the hours. Others have decided to incorporate community service into regular lessons in an approach known as service learning.

The number of school systems that now mandate some form of service has mushroomed. According to the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse for based in St. Paul, Minn., the number of high school students performing service increased nearly seven-fold from 1984 to 1997, when 6.1 million students did some form of community service. In 1997, 96 percent of school districts offered some form of community service, up from 27 percent in 1984. Between 16 and 18 percent of school districts required service for graduation, up slightly from 1984, according to studies cited by the clearinghouse.

### Different Directions

The service programs vary widely in scope and quality. Administrators in school systems with programs deemed by others to be successful say the critical components include building community support, allowing students to decide what to do, training teachers, recognizing student projects and getting students to reflect on what they do. Programs that lack either administrative or community support or those seen as detracting from academics, like Jefferson Parish's, are almost destined to fail.

Before instituting its program in August 1997, the Chicago Public Schools solicited community support, visited other systems, gave coaching stipends to educators in each school to shepherd the program and identified ways that teachers could integrate service hours into the curriculum. Top school administrators in the Windy City continue to be visible supporters of the program.

The exhortation those leaders give, says Chicago's Chief Education Officer Cozette Buckney, is this: "No matter how bad off you think you are, someone's worse. ... Well, maybe I can't buy \$100 Michael Jordan shoes, but I can have a coat drive for children in the neighborhood."

In the first semester of 1999-2000, Chicago's high school students completed more than 500,000 hours of community service.

In the 51,400-student Jefferson Parish schools, however, building administrators viewed the community-service requirement as something that detracted from academics. In the Louisiana parish named for the nation's 3rd president, students were explicitly prohibited from earning volunteer hours during class time. They could, however, rack up credits while working on Mardi Gras parades, at church or in political campaigns, except school board elections.

School system administrators tried to prod students into completing the number of required hours by listing their accumulated hours on report cards and delivering reminders in grade-level and homeroom meetings and via school-created videos played over each school's in-house TV channel. But when they discovered that only 35 percent of the parish's juniors had completed their hours this March, administrators convinced the school board to abandon the policy, instead offering diploma stickers to those graduates who complete their 60 hours of good deeds.

"We didn't catch a whole bunch of slack for getting rid of it," says Jefferson Parish School Board member Ray St. Pierre. "We didn't even catch flack from the Times-Picayune," the daily newspaper in New Orleans.

### **Careful Preparations**

What made a difference in the outcomes of the two school district's community-service requirements? Many would point to the preparatory spadework or lack thereof.

Chicago's community-service requirement came out of a task force that spent five years working to redesign high schools, says Buckney, the chief education officer under Superintendent Paul Vallas. That group already had communicated the goals of the program to many constituencies, foundations and organizations. Even though Chicago's board of education approved the service-learning requirement in 1996, it wasn't implemented until 1997, giving task force members additional time to ensure a smooth implementation.

Advises Buckney: "This is not something you can jump into."

Before developing its policy, Chicago's leaders visited other districts with successful service-learning programs, including Baltimore and Austin, Texas. "You shouldn't have to create the wheel on this," he says.

The Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform's standards of quality for service-learning programs recommends school leaders communicate the significance of the effort even to "those who are not directly involved in service learning."

Service learning is "often a hard sell because folks think it's one more thing" added to the curriculum, when in fact it can enhance learning, says Marilyn Swierk, author of *A Guide to Service Learning*, a how-to book to running a program.

That seems to be the official view in Jefferson Parish, La. Administrators there suggested repealing the requirement, which would have gone into effect for the class of 2001, by arguing before the school board that increased academic achievement was the priority of the system and that graduation should be the result of academic achievement alone.

Although the district's original policy tried to prevent procrastination by requiring seniors who lacked their hours to take a community-service course, administrators balked at the likelihood of offering the course to about 1,000 students the following year.

"It meant another semester of [financial] spending on a course that would have no bearing on their academic future," explains Jefferson Parish School Board member St. Pierre, a former coach and teacher. "Generally speaking, I think the kids who did (complete the hours) are usually your better kids, the ones who get their work done on time. They're probably not the complainer-type kids. Probably when they did it, they enjoyed doing it."

### **Stakeholder Buy-In**

Many school systems with community-service mandates began by creating study groups, comprised of community members, teachers and school officials who debated the merits of the plan before putting anything in place.

Randy Collins (at left), superintendent in Waterford, Conn., which mandates service as a graduation requirement, advises his colleagues considering a community-service program to first "get a read on their community."

He adds: "Although I'm a huge proponent of service learning--where we use service to the community as a teaching strategy--I would not advocate every school system mandate it. In some systems, that would be more destructive than helpful."

Collins believes the use of a community wide study group establishes a base of wide support once a service requirement takes effect.

"I felt it was important that they reach their own conclusions without my opinion unduly considered," the superintendent says. The night the Waterford board adopted the requirement, the board chair voted in favor of the mandate, while her son, the president of the high school's student council, opposed it.

"But she voted, and he didn't," quips Collins.

In the Corpus Christi, Texas, Independent School District, community service is a required part of the social studies curriculum in 1st through 8th grade, says Dixie Binford, the school services consultant responsible for the district's K-12 social studies program. Then-superintendent Abelardo Saavedra, pushed hard to include service learning as Corpus Christi revamped its academic standards, she said.

Before the policy was implemented, the system held community forums in different parts of town to explain the proposal and ask parents what they wanted students to be able to do when they graduated.

After hearing from teachers, Corpus Christi opted not to require community-service hours of high school students, Binford says. High school teachers argued that their students had full course loads and were involved in extracurricular activities that fostered leadership and similar skills and character traits.

"We just felt that to require it through the academic standards would be unfair to the students," Binford explains.

Even in the lower grades, the district leaves how to incorporate service to the discretion of individual teachers because, she says, "We felt if you made it a hard-and-fast rule, you are destroying the spirit of community service. A student's time in Scouting might apply to the service, depending upon the wishes of the teacher."

The District of Columbia requires 100 hours of service for high school graduation, but Beverly O'Bryant, the community-service coordinator, thinks administrators should begin stressing service to students in middle school or junior high. "Generally their apprehension level is slightly lower," she says.

Waterford's Collins advocates having an advisory committee of students, so that the leaders of the student body will take responsibility for the program.

### **Academic Merits**

Advocates of service programs refute the notion that their programs aren't academic. Done well, community-service programs can change people's minds about the educational value of service, argues Luke Frazier, executive director of the Maryland Student Service Alliance.

Maryland is the only state requiring all students to perform 75 hours of community service to graduate. The state leaves the details up to local systems.

"I can't count the number of times in the last four years I heard from someone who said, 'I really thought this was a bad idea and didn't want to do this, but wow, I got interested in fill-in-the-blank, working with youngsters, environmental studies, working with a soup kitchen, and I still do it,' even after their requirement for service learning was filled," says Frazier.

### **Among the examples nationwide:**

- In the District of Columbia, high school geometry students honed their graphing skills with a community improvement project. They scoured their neighborhoods and inventoried the number of liquor stores and liquor advertisements posted near churches, recreation centers and health facilities. They graphed and analyzed the data, then wrote to the mayor, pointing out the heavy concentration in certain city quadrants and suggesting ways to improve the neighborhoods.

- In San Diego, Calif., high school students are volunteering as literacy tutors in feeder elementary schools. The older students bolster their own reading skills, while maintaining a journal of their activities, and monitor the progress of the child with whom they work.
- Students in Corpus Christi, Texas, read a newspaper article about the oldest house in the city falling apart and decided to take action. They studied the historic construction of the building, an unusual amalgam of oyster shells and mortar. Students collect money each month to send to the local heritage society.

### **Real-Life Learning**

Several superintendents believe that service must be integrated into the curriculum for the greatest impact. Robert H. Holster, superintendent in Passaic, N.J., is among them. He says school districts shouldn't have to defend community service for its academic value because service fulfills John Dewey's credo that "all genuine education comes through experience."

Holster adds: "A lot of students are in isolation in the classroom, disconnected from what they are learning in school and what happens in the real world."

Passaic students have been performing community service through various courses. In one, bilingual students in social studies classes have gone to the polls to help Hispanic voters to interpret the ballot. Now the school board is considering mandating service as a condition of graduation. Holster has proposed students accumulate at least 50 hours of community service during their four years of high school to earn a diploma.

Community-service programs enable administrators to "demonstrate to constituents and to taxpayers that what we are doing has a sense of value," he says.

"We have to have students and young people feel that they are stakeholders in their community," says Janet Delaney, who manages the San Diego City School's Partnerships in Education program, which oversees the service-learning program. "We have to promote our young people as not part of the problem in a community, but they are part of the solution in the community."

Service learning also offers students real-life examples of what they're studying, such as bringing students studying Alzheimer's disease into contact with elderly sufferers, she adds.

"This brings learning alive. It makes it real," says Delaney. "One of the things public education has struggled with forever is finding real-life context. That's what service learning does."

And service learning produces tangible academic improvements. "We've seen improved attendance and learning. Real kids are more into the visual and experiential. They need to do it to understand it, rather than having someone talk at them," Delaney says.

Chicago's program also afforded many students, especially inner-city youth, an opportunity to "feel that they're contributing to someone else," says Buckney. Volunteerism, she adds, allows students from Chicago's diverse ethnic groups--African-American, Chinese, Latin, Polish and others--to mingle, which doesn't happen often enough outside of school.

### **Dubious Quality**

But even those who support community-service programs acknowledge that the quality can vary widely. Frazier admits that Maryland's service-learning programs in its 23 county school districts range from marginal to exemplary.

"I defy anyone in another state to show me that every 9th grade algebra class is equally excellent," said Frazier.

To help promote quality programs, Maryland offers a guide to the best practices in student service and posts these on the Internet.

Swierk, the 1993 National Family and Consumer Sciences Teacher of the Year, recommends that systems "start with a non-required small program first so models are developed, successes and buy-ins can be seen."

"The majority of what I have seen is isolated programs that are the models and the system grows from there," says Swierk. "So much depends on the people coordinating this and their dedication and of course the support they receive from administrators."

But opponents of mandatory service have argued that some systems allow students to earn community-service credit for things not done outside the classroom. In Maryland, some school districts give students credit for extracurricular activities such as performing in the

marching band or managing a sports team or for simply completing a course in photography.

### **Staff Support**

Programs for mandatory service that include training at the outset and ongoing professional development are more apt to encourage teacher involvement and to be more successful, says Swierk. Sometimes, a schoolwide or district-wide program catches on when one teacher notices another having great success with a service project.

"One of the biggest problems with mandatory service is lack of preparation of the staff," says Swierk, an author, speaker and consultant who earned a national teacher of the year award for her work in designing a service-learning program.

In Chicago, each school has a service-learning coach, who is paid a stipend to work with teachers to develop service-learning projects. The District of Columbia has community-service coordinators, teachers or counselors who earn a stipend by helping students find community-service placements and help to track the student service hours.

Corpus Christi sends principals weekly informational packets, and Binford, the community-service coordinator, frequently visits different schools to consult with teachers. She encourages them to contact her via e-mail between visits. She helps teachers focus on lessons that she believes are "manageable and worthwhile" and raises questions to guide their thinking.

"Do you want kids to do individual projects? Do this as a class or with the whole school? Do this as a long-term project, like recycling? If you do something like that, you can do this as an interdisciplinary thing and bring in science, math and language arts," says Binford.

She has discovered elementary teachers are more willing to incorporate service learning, while middle school teachers "become more territorial of content area."

### **Safeguarding Students**

Systems need to think about the safety of student volunteers. In Chicago, parents voiced concerns about children venturing into unfamiliar neighborhoods.

In fact, concerns about student safety are one of the primary reasons schools balk at requiring community service, says Robert Shumer, director of the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse. At the same time, he says, there doesn't seem to be any evidence students have been seriously injured in school-mandated service projects.

To allay such fears, Chicago set up a service-learning office that works with about 200 partners with pre-screened volunteer programs. San Diego schools contract with the United Way Volunteer Center to maintain a list of 150 agencies they have screened and approved as a safe environment for young people.

"Because they have been processed through United Way, we're not just sending kids anywhere," says Delaney, who oversees community service in San Diego's schools.

The San Diego district also developed a handbook advising agencies how to receive student volunteers.

### **Tracking Hours**

Service learning must be evaluated and tracked, without becoming an undue burden on teachers.

At the beginning of the senior year, school counselors in the District of Columbia review student files to check on academic credits and community-service hours.

"It has to be treated like any other mandate," says Waterford's Collins, who believes school districts should give students who don't want to do volunteer work within school courses an opportunity to accomplish their hours on their own.

"I know for a fact, in my heart, there are kids who have submitted documentation who didn't do the hours," says Collins. "Just like there are kids who cheat on English papers. The idea is not to monitor it so closely. My theory is that the vast majority will benefit. Those who sneak by, we're not going to spend a lot of time monitoring."

In Corpus Christi, community members "didn't want students graded on how much they did, because it's so hard to compare my hours in Girl Scouts to your hours as a candystriper," says Binford.

Administrators who have had service mandates haven't reported large numbers of students barred from graduating because they didn't complete the hours. In most cases, students who haven't completed mandated volunteer hours lack the academic credits or grades to graduate.

### **Recognize and Reflect**

Effective community-service programs also tend to publicly recognize successful service projects. San Diego, which doesn't require students to complete hours, instead honors graduates who fulfill a service commitment with a service-learning recognition citation, likely to impress college admissions directors.

Chicago publishes a monthly newsletter, paid for by a grant, called Service Learning News, that lists successful programs and students and teachers who have done outstanding projects.

Service-learning advocates agree that the most successful programs require students to reflect on their experiences.

In San Diego, graduating students present a portfolio of what they consider their finest work during high school years and many students "are talking about service-learning experiences," says Delaney.

Passaic's Holster says service programs should lay out expectations that are measurable and observable. In his district, students are required to reflect upon their service. The superintendent attributes the improvements in student attendance (up to 93.4 percent daily in 1999-2000 from 90.1 percent the year before), lower dropout rate (down to 10.6 percent from 12.2 percent) and fewer student suspensions (a drop of nearly 1,100 in a single year) largely to the community service students have performed.

### **Long-Term Value**

Swierk, the service-learning consultant thinks every school could benefit from some sort of community-service program for its students.

"We don't do enough in schools with this. ... We worry too much about advanced calculus and not enough about applying learning to practical situations," she argues.

"All parents want for their children--college prep or not--to be successful in life, family, career and community," Swierk says. "Most kids don't use the calculus or French but do use human relations skills, budgeting, parenting, etc., every day."

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