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Thousands of high school students across the nation perform some form of community service everyday. They tutor younger students, care for elderly people, assist physically challenged peers and aid in local government offices. Students involved in these projects openly testify to the many benefits possible from service learning activities. Recent qualitative studies also indicate that students gain a greater sense of self, increase their concern for fellow human beings, demonstrate better problem solving abilities, and integrate classroom learning more readily with real-world needs (Conrad and Hedin, 1982). Former Maryland State Superintendent David Hornbeck so firmly believed in the power and effectiveness of engaging students in meaningful service to their communities that he recommended service learning as a state-wide mandatory requirement for high school graduation. In July of 1992, Maryland's State Board of Education followed this recommendation and mandated 75 hours of student service before graduation. This action sparked a great deal of public debate across the country. From formal meetings, such as the National Service Learning Conference held in Albuquerque just last month, to informal lunchroom discussions, teachers across the nation are debating the question: Should high schools require a service learning component for graduation?

Definition

Before examining many of the arguments on each side of this issue, service learning must be clearly defined. Although many forms of community service exist, most educators agree that in a strong school-based service learning program "the student plays a significant role in working with others to perform tasks that both the young person and the community regard as worthwhile and needed. The program supports the service activities with a clear and explicit curriculum that challenges students to think about and reflect on the meaning of their volunteer experience" (Hedin & Conrad, 1987, p.245). The three components mentioned above, namely, student and community involvement, curricular support, and time for reflection, seem to be critical for any successful program. Schools have developed such programs in various forms including after school extracurricular activities, a project within an academic course, or a separate community service course for academic credit. In the 1986 survey of school-based service learning programs, Fred Newmann and Robert Rutter found that nearly 27 percent of all high schools in the nation offer some type of community service program as an elective or as a voluntary for-credit program. Five percent of the schools require community service for graduation.

History

The recent resurgence of service learning programs in high schools has a long historical precedent in the United States. One of the earliest proponents of school-based community service was William Kilpatrick, who urged educators in the 1920s to move learning outside the school where real community needs could be met (Conrad & Hedin, 1991). In the 1950s, the Citizenship Education Project initiated by Columbia University's Teachers College stressed direct community involvement as well. In the 1970s, reports by the National Committee on Secondary Education and the Panel on High School and Adolescent Education and others encouraged educators to integrate youth into the community to counteract the perceived passivity of young people. In the 1980s, many educators wrote about the positive impact of service learning experiences including: John Goodlad in A Place Called School, Eliot Wigginton in Sometimes a Shining Moment , and Ernest Boyer in High School , in which he recommends that high schools require 120 hours of community service for graduation. The most recent spark to the service learning initiative came at the beginning of this decade, when President Bush signed into law the National and Community Service Act of 1990.

Arguments for Mandatory Service Learning

Proponents of mandatory service learning usually first cite the

many benefits that community service can provide to the community, school, and students. The community can truly benefit when students provide services to elderly people in their homes or at nursing homes, collect food for the hungry, teach recreational activities to handicapped children, clean rivers and parks, turn vacant lots into playgrounds, or work for a political candidate (Conrad & Hedin, 1987). These projects can unite the community behind a much needed, but neglected project. Senator Edward Kennedy believes that this type of service should be not only an option, but rather a requirement to maintain our democratic system. He explains that "democracy means more than the freedom to pursue our own self-interest. It also means the responsibility to participate in the life of the community and the nation--the responsibility to give something back to America in return for all it has given us" (Kennedy, 1991, p.772).

School-based community service can also benefit the school. Many meaningful service projects can be found right on the campus. Peer-tutoring, school clean-up, landscaping projects, and recycling efforts are just a few examples of how students can contribute to the operation of the school. Their input will increase their pride and sense of responsibility to the institution and most likely decrease vandalism and graffiti on the campus.

The benefits to the students themselves are usually cited as the

primary reason why high schools should require service learning.
Recent studies and student anecdotes confirm potential academic,
social, and psychological impacts (Conrad & Hedin, 1989). James
Kielsmeier, the president of the National Youth Leadership Council,
believes that "when teachers integrate service and social action into
their academic program, students learn to communicate, to solve
problems, to think critically, and to exercise higher-order skills" (Nathan &
Kielsmeier, 1991, p. 741). The Director for the National Center for
Service Learning in Early Adolescence, Alice Halsted, offers several
specific illustrations of how the connection between academics and
service learning can be made. She writes, "When students are working
in senior centers and simultaneously studying neighborhood
demographics or the effects of the Social Security Act on the elderly or
monitoring levels of toxic substances in a local stream...connections are
being made to traditional subject areas and learning is enlivened"
(Halsted, personal communication, March 1, 1994).

Quantitative research provides some evidence for several
academic benefits of service learning. In a comprehensive research
review, Conrad and Hedin (1989) summarized the research findings on
the impact of service on high school students. Various studies show
specific academic achievement as a result of tutoring. Students involved
in this type of service showed an improvement in their writing skills or

math competency, depending on the subject they tutored. Other studies indicated that students involved in political or social action service projects gained in problem-solving abilities, open-mindedness and critical thinking capabilities (Conrad & Hedin, 1989).

Service learning experiences have also impacted students' social consciousness and psychological development. Researchers in the 1980s found that students in service programs developed more favorable attitudes toward adults, had fewer discipline problems and felt more valuable to the community (Conrad & Hedin, 1989). Increases in self-esteem are the most commonly reported psychological benefits from service-learning. According to one study conducted by Hedin and Conrad (1980), students in 24 of the 28 programs studied increased both general self-esteem and self-esteem in social situations. The interaction with diverse populations in unusual situations gave students the experiences necessary to feel more confident about their social skills.

The numerous benefits accrued through service learning have led many educators and politicians to argue for mandatory service requirements for graduation. The William T. Grant Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship (1988) so strongly supports the service learning concept, that they recommended that "every public school, [offer] (a) either a requirement that each school provide opportunities to every student for a voluntary service-learning program...which is eligible for

elective credit toward graduation, or a graduation requirement of a specified amount of service" (p. 449).

Many teachers, students and administrators also argue that service should be mandatory. They believe the benefits to the students, community and school warrant the requirement. Program coordinators in one study claimed that "all students ought to be exposed to service. It's the school's duty to require this experience...Requiring service is the only way we could be assured that everybody would have a service experience" (Levison, 1986, p.548). Many students agree, claiming they would never do community service if it were not required. And as qualitative studies on student service experiences have shown, often the most reluctant students at the beginning of a service project are the ones who benefit the most (Conrad & Hedin, 1989). Those who advocate required community service believe that service is good for all students regardless of their attitude toward it, regardless of their maturity and whether or not they want to do it.

Political scientist Benjamin Barber argues that requiring community service is a natural addition to the core curriculum. He believes that "if service is understood as a dimension of citizenship education and civic responsibility in which individuals... become empowered...then to require service is to do no more...than is done in curricula decisions generally" (Barber, 1993, p. 13). Requiring service,

therefore, can only enhance the curriculum.

Implications

The proponents of mandatory service learning see these programs as a way to encourage student reform as well as school reform. They believe that students will not change unless they are required to face difficult, uncomfortable and challenging situations in the community. These educators believe that once students feel needed and valuable in the community; see the connections between school and life outside of the classroom; and experience pride in their contributions, they will be more motivated to continue their education and less likely to drop-out.

Another serious implication of mandatory service learning is the radical reform required of the school's structure. If students are in the community for large portions of the day or week, the rigid six period a day schedule will no longer serve their needs. Teachers will have to be in the field supervising and monitoring their students, rather than in the classroom grading papers. Administrators will have to organize transportation and work with possible liability problems of students off-campus. Mandatory service learning has the potential to seriously shake up the currently slow moving school reform efforts. As one school principal comments, "Service-learning may be the vehicle to facilitate school reform. Specifically, it can assist us in changing the structure of the school day, which I think is a critical key to any reform effort"

(McPherson, 1991, p.751).

Finally, mandatory service learning has implications for the community. If students are required to be involved with community programs, businesses and services, the towns and cities will have to find ways to absorb these young people. With careful planning the community could greatly benefit from their volunteer services, but if the schools do not have community approval and support, the program can only lead to failure and frustration.

Arguments against Mandatory Service Learning

Opponents of mandatory service learning quickly point out the obvious paradox between required and voluntary service. This paradox cannot be ignored and many educators believe this discrepancy alone is enough to reject any type of service requirement. In some school districts where service has been required, students and parents have argued that mandatory service is not only philosophically unjustified, but also unconstitutional. They claim involuntary service violates the 13th ammendment prohibition against "involuntary servitude" (Townsend, 1993). The parents of students in Bethlehem, PA, used this argument to appeal their case all the way to the Supreme Court where the justices refused to hear it. (Halsted, personal communication, Mar. 1, 1994). The philosophical and legal arguments against mandating service learning have caused many school districts to rethink the requirement.

Other opponents of service learning question its purported

benefits and claim that required service learning can actually do more

harm than good to the community, to the school and to the students

themselves. Students must be trained before they can provide any

service and the community must invite the students help. If a strong

cooperative connection between the school, students and the community

is not built first, students may actually promote increased animosity

among the school and outside community. The necessary type of

community cooperation may take years to develop, but if schools do not

make the effort, service learning projects are certainly doomed.

Communities may also raise the legitimate question about the ability of

untrained youths to contribute to their specific needs. Others fear that

students who feel angry about the requirement to do a service will

actually do a disservice to their clients and the community. The students'

negative attitude would clearly carry over into their project undermining

the quality of their work. Even school administrators do not always see

the positive side of working so closely with the community. Cynthia

Parsons (1991) reports that superintendents often view community

service as a "boat rocker instead of as a significant opportunity to

improve relations [with the community]" (p.770).

Often the strongest opponents of mandatory service are the

teachers. They argue that the school and the students will suffer when

students are forced to go into the community. The detractors are worried that teachers will have even less time to devote to the basics if they have to go into the community to supervise their students. Other educators feel strongly that school reform and meaningful curricular change will not happen simply when a course in service is required for credit.

Many feel that learning is not inherent in service. Teachers look for concrete proof that service can replace or at least enhance the academic abilities of their students. Even Fred Newmann, the director of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research and a strong service learning advocate, admits, "there is no conclusive quantitative evidence that students' participation in service learning actually enhances their performance in the academic areas" (Newmann, personal communication, February 18, 1994). Students on a competitive college-bound track may suffer from the reduced time in class and not gain equivalent academic benefits from their projects. The lack of conclusive evidence has led many teachers to argue that while community service may be beneficial to some, it should not be a requirement for all.

Finally, studies show that required service learning programs suffer from lack of student interest. Several program coordinators fear that required service may turn students away from any future service activities after high school (Levison, 1986). Students claim that "mandatory service carries a large negative connotation because we feel

like the faculty is trying to control our lives...if you are forced to do it, it becomes a chore" (Levison, 1986, p. 547). Even when educators agree with the benefits and positive impacts of service learning, many are hesitant to mandate courses in service.

Administrators offer other more practical arguments against mandatory service learning. They understand the difficulty of finding funding for transportation for students working throughout the community, and of providing extra planning time for teachers to procure projects, to observe their students in action, and to help students reflect on their learning. Some of these time and budget concerns offer insurmountable obstacles to mandatory service learning projects.

Implications

The 'mandate' for service learning undermines the very basis for service, which should focus on the spirit of giving freely. Someone who does not want to serve, should not be forced to do it. Certainly, a penalty such as not graduating should not be offered as motivation for service. As Levison (1986) writes, "Schools that require service without thinking about the implications of the decision may turn required service into a barrier" (p. 549).

While proponents of service learning offer almost panacea-like results from successful programs, opponents see the lack of concrete evidence and practical obstacles precluding any potential benefits. The

call and search for "evidence" and results may ironically cause the failure of many programs. Some states and districts receive funding for their programs contingent on the results within the first couple of years, but because researchers can not efficiently isolate the learning effects of service projects, many studies may show inconclusive evidence. These programs then lose funding and schools are forced to drop their service requirements. The arguments against service learning imply that it could become just another fad in the variety of school reform proposals doomed to failure or continued controversy.

Author's Position

I strongly believe in the potential benefits of service learning, but I just as strongly oppose mandated community service. My personal experience with involuntary service learning has convinced me that involuntary service without adequate reflection time can entrench negative attitudes which may preclude any learning opportunities.

At the beginning of the school year, I organized a peer tutoring program between a class of gifted students and my English as a Second Language (ESL) students. I chose this particular gifted class because their teacher was willing to work with me, taught her students during coinciding periods, and claimed the tutoring would fit into her "World Cultures" course curriculum. I was enthusiastic about the potential linguistic and social benefits for my ESL students as well as the

possibility of reducing prejudice, fear and misunderstanding among the gifted students toward the ESL population.

During the course of the semester, I noticed increased dissent and dissatisfaction among the gifted students. They came to tutoring sessions unprepared, refused to interact with my students and often failed to report to the class. My ESL students felt abandoned and confused. When I finally had the opportunity to do a survey and receive some feedback, I learned that most students were angry that they had been "volunteered" for the service and were given no option. Even those who reported having a positive experience mentioned their disapproval of the requirement. I am convinced that the tutoring opportunity could have benefitted both groups greatly, if it had been established on a voluntary basis with regular and guided times for reflection and processing of their impressions, questions and frustrations.

I strongly support schools' efforts to establish voluntary service opportunities for credit for all students, but the students must first want to participate in the activities and courses. Perhaps as more and more students volunteer and report positive experiences to their peers, the reluctant students may be convinced to give the community learning opportunity a try.

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