

Mandated Service and Moral Learning

Recently the Maryland State Board of Education added a new condition for getting a high school diploma: students must perform 75 hours of "service." The activities that count as "service" will be determined by individual districts, and may include everything from tutoring younger students and visiting nursing home residents to working with non-profit community organizations. The new requirement builds on an already existing voluntary student service program supported by the Maryland Student Service Alliance, a public-private partnership. Although some municipal school systems in the U.S. impose similar requirements, the Maryland school board is the first to adopt a statewide policy.

Because the new policy mandates rather than simply encourages service, it has stimulated considerable comment and some controversy. The *New York Times*, for example, weighed in with an editorial entitled "True 'Service' Can't Be Coerced," questioning "whether mandated service is the best approach." The *Times's* lukewarm reaction to the Maryland program was somewhat curious, however, in light of the fact that on three occasions in the 1980s, the newspaper embraced universal national service for new high school graduates, without letting the possibly compulsory or coercive nature of that service seriously dampen its enthusiasm. This editorial record is peculiar because our natural response about compulsion, I think, goes the other way: we suppose it less morally



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and legally objectionable to compel children than young adults, rather than the reverse.

Indeed, states typically have compulsory attendance laws requiring all children below a certain age to be in school. Children's education is not optional.

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Nor is much of their educational experience. At the same time Maryland mandated public service it also required all high school students to take algebra and geometry, "technology education," U.S. and world history, and government affairs courses before graduating. No one editorialized about *those* requirements.

I don't believe forcing students to do some service can be wrong *in principle*. Whether it makes sense to impose a service mandate depends upon its educational purpose and the likely results.

The Educational Purpose of Service

What is the educational purpose? The Maryland Student Service Alliance characterizes "service-learning" this way: "Students learn by identifying and studying community issues, taking action to address them, and reflecting on their experience." This characterization suggests that one point of service-learning is better social analysis. By engaging in service, students will better learn to describe social problems, uncover cause-and-effect, and formulate strategies for change.

If mandated service were only a means to developing students' descriptive powers, analytic insight, and strategic efficacy, its educational purpose would excite little comment. Those opposed to service would focus only on its pedagogical effectiveness. More is at stake in the Maryland controversy, however, since the mandated service clearly aims at more

than “service-learning.” As state school superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick explained, “I can’t think of a better example of character development than the lesson that what we take from the community we give back to the community.” The larger goal of the mandated service, then, is to teach a lesson in obligation. In teaching this lesson, service purportedly trains good character. The character of students, and not their analytical adeptness, is at the heart of the Maryland program.

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Now, some people think character training is inappropriate in high schools. One irate citizen of Maryland blasted the Board of Education’s “arrogance” in deciding that “students ought to graduate with a better understanding of what it means to be responsible for others.... It is certainly not what high school education is or should be all about.” The citizen was not alone in his sentiments.

I do not think these sentiments wholly tenable. Schools cannot avoid character training, even if only as a by-product of maintaining order, creating a learning environment, and demanding honest classwork. Schools ought to insist that students respect one another and do their part in contributing to a decent school community. The Maryland mandate goes further, however. It intends to teach students a lesson in obligation toward the larger community, not just toward one another and their school organization. *This* lesson schools *could* avoid deliberately emphasizing. They could avoid emphasizing it, but they couldn’t avoid conveying it indirectly except by gutting the curriculum, since so much of the literature, history, and civics that students study exhibits the values of mutual aid, relief of distress, and duty to a larger community. The intended lesson in “what it means to be responsible for others” does not seem out of keeping with the civic mission of schools to prepare children for the duties of citizenship.

These remarks are unlikely to mollify the irate citizen, but I do not want to defend further the propriety of having schools teach the lesson of community obligation. Rather, taking its propriety for granted, I want to ask whether *mandating* service can teach the appropriate lesson. Is the *New York Times* right that true service can’t be coerced? Does the mandate presuppose a wrongheaded conception of moral learning?

Moral Learning

Acquiring good character—learning to be a good person—is not a matter of learning information or skills; it is a matter of learning *to care* about certain sorts of things. Children don’t come ready-equipped with well-formed and appropriate carings, whether moral or nonmoral; they must learn what to care about. They learn by adopting the carings of their elders. They learn by being inducted into a way of doing things.

Children learn to care about brushing their teeth and keeping clean because their parents set them a routine of brushing and bathing, *just like the one the parents follow*. They learn to care about telling the truth because their parents demand truthfulness and practice it: *one just does not lie*. They learn to care about the welfare of others not by being told to care but by seeing their parents themselves manifestly and uncalculatingly care: *caring for others is just what one does*.

The character of children gets formed and developed as various carings become habituated and fixed. If children are to care about doing their duty, there must be duties to do. When parents and schools set children the task of tending to people in need, or cleaning up common community space, or shouldering necessary but unremunerated collective burdens, they create expectations of proper behavior. They induct children into a way of life.

There are, of course, good *reasons* for helping people in need, cleaning up common space, and shouldering necessary burdens, but these reasons will effectively motivate only those who already care about helping, or who at least care about acting on good reasons — itself a care that children must have picked up from parents, mentors, teachers, and other adults. So, a conception of moral learning that focused *only* on cognitive tasks such as finding reasons, doing analysis, making arguments, and planning strategy would leave out a vital element. It would fail to emphasize the crucial contribution to moral learning of specific practices—practices that structure the carings children will acquire.

That is why some objections to the Maryland scheme go awry. One student, for example, complained that if the schools want to teach the value of service, the proper place for such teaching is in a values-discussion class. The complaint misses the point. Though talking about values is certainly a part of education, talking *about* value is not the same thing as learning *to* value — and it is the latter that the Maryland mandate means to accomplish.

A scheme of public service embedded in the public school curriculum can convey the message that serving others is simply part of the life of a mature and

educated person. The Maryland program is not educationally wrongheaded because it is mandatory. It may effectively teach a lesson in obligation and contribute to the good character of students precisely *because* it is mandatory.

Implementing the Lesson

I said the Maryland mandate “may” convey a desirable message and “may” teach a lesson in obligation, not that it will. Two cautions must be noted. First, when I observed that children learn to care by picking up the carings of their elders, I suggested that the learning derives not from what elders *say* they care about but from the caring that elders actually manifest. Students, for example, may be told the importance of their grammar exercises, but if their teachers themselves are slovenly in speech and writing and if the larger society puts little value on grammaticality, students are unlikely themselves to care very much about grammatical correctness. They will endure their exercises, not be educated by them.

Students are good at recognizing empty form. They know when teachers and parents are simply “going through the motions,” without real conviction or devotion. Consequently, the Maryland mandate may send mixed signals to students. By imposing the service requirement on all the students of Maryland, the State says that adults take service seriously. But by imposing the requirement without simultaneously providing material support for schools to plan worthwhile service activities and opportunities, the State seems to say that adults don’t take service terribly seriously. To the extent that schools in these financially pinched times can’t devote much planning to their service programs or to the extent they let students fend for themselves, the service mandate may be seen by students as just one more pointless exercise they must endure.

To introduce my second caution about the Maryland program, let’s reflect a moment on the asymmetrical attitudes we take toward compelling children and compelling adults. What we find offensive about mandating certain kinds of public service by adults is this. The duty to serve the community—and let’s concede we have one—doesn’t entail a specific performance. It only entails that we be sensitive to the community’s needs and make some contribution over time to collective burdens. But there are any number of equally good patterns of service that satisfy the duty. For example, I may throw myself into full-time work with non-profit organizations my first decade out of college and then taper off my involvement to develop a career and family. You may start a career and family right out of college and later, in your

fifties, take early retirement and begin working full-time with non-profit organizations. A third person may give only a small amount of time each year, but give it continuously over the course of his whole life. Which of us has better discharged our duty to serve the community? I may devote time to helping the homeless, you to supporting local Boys and Girls Clubs, a third person to promoting political activism. Which of us has better discharged our duty to serve the community? I may give mostly financial support, you mostly personal labor, and a third person a mixture of the two. Which of us has better discharged our duty? The answer is that any one of these patterns, and any number of others, satisfies the duty to serve the community.

Consequently, we leave it to adults to work out for themselves how to integrate career, family, religious commitments, community service, and other moral duties into a unique plan of life. We leave it to them because there is no single best plan to impose; because we think adults capable of planning, and disposed to plan, morally responsive lives; and because there are few greater personal goods than giving direction to one’s own life.

We exercise compulsion over small children because they don’t yet have the capability and disposition to plan morally responsive lives. The capability and the disposition have to be implanted and cultivated, at home and in school. Between small children and fully autonomous adults, however, lies an intermediate group—teenagers approaching the age of emancipation. Everything else being equal, their educational experience ought to give greater room to choice and personal direction.

Thus, my second caution: mandated public service in high school may teach a lesson in obligation, but mandated service might more appropriately (and successfully) teach this lesson in the early instead of the late years of schooling. The Maryland program might make best sense applied not to grades 6-12 but to grades 1-8. Then it could be followed by encouragement and support in the high school for continued *voluntary* public service. Under this scheme, children would be inducted from the beginning into a form of life that includes service and then, as they approach maturity, given opportunities to experiment with their own, unique morally responsive plans of life.

— Robert K. Fullinwider

Sources: *The New York Times*, March 13, 1983; Dec. 10, 1986; Jan. 22, 1989; Aug. 2, 1992. *The Baltimore Sun*, July 29 and Aug. 18, 1992. *The Washington Post*, July 30, 1992. Maryland Student Service Alliance Fact Sheet, “Service-Learning in Maryland.”