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## Service as Learning: One School's Story

by Deborah L. Bright

**C**ole Porter first alerted us in 1934, and three decades later, Bob Dylan reminded us: times are *definitely* changing. Too true. As we stand with one foot balanced precariously on the ledge of a new millennium, the world around us seems different almost from day to day, from moment to fleeting moment. The pace of this change quickens not arithmetically, but exponentially, and the students we see before us in our classrooms are preparing themselves to inherit from us a world we may not even recognize.

Everywhere we turn, we are confronted with the double-edged sword of progress. Advances in science and technology offer to future generations the vast potential benefits of gene therapy, hand in hand with the ethical dilemmas of cloning; the Internet brings people and information into our very homes in real time, forcing us to decide instantly what is reliable and worthwhile, and what is suspect or potentially harmful. A hundred years ago, at the turn of the last century, "aids" were something that helped you, we had not yet coined the term "world war," and Eniac, great-granddaddy of all of today's high-tech computer gadgets, was still no more than a twinkle in a programmer's eye.

Society has changed, we've changed, and certainly over the course of the last century schools have changed to try to keep pace. Middle schools, charter schools, essential schools—reform, restructuring; class size and competency—*boy*, have schools changed! The sheer quantity of what we'd like our students to know—books they absolutely must read, experiments they just have to perform, experiences they cannot miss—is breathtaking, daunting, crushing. Through it all, attempting to set priorities and keep our sights on the "big picture" of this seemingly impossible endeavor, thoughtful and responsible educators in every age have asked themselves the same important questions about the profession: Who are our students? Where are they going? What shall we teach them? *How* shall we teach them?



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*A school with a long history of nonstructured service learning works to refine a more formal program.*

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*"It is the present, the immediate use of knowledge acquired, that arouses in children the highest zest for learning."<sup>1</sup>*

Eighty-seven years ago, a small group of thoughtful and clear-sighted people founded a school in San Diego. Clara Sturges Johnson and Ethel Sturges Dummer, sisters born into a philanthropic Chicago family before the turn of this century, brought with them to the West Coast the ideals and methods of the progressive educator Col. Francis Wayland Parker. With only three students enrolled, the sisters and Johnson's husband, William Templeton Johnson, opened their school in his name on December 31, 1912.

Two of the Dummer's daughters had been educated at the school Parker founded, with Anita McCormick Blaine and Principal Flora J. Cooke, in Chicago just before his death. Johnson and Dummer believed strongly in Colonel Parker's vision of schools and students. According to Parker and the founders of the San Diego school, students should learn by doing, encouraged to understand and fulfill their responsibilities as citizens of the community and the nation; the public schools in a democracy such as ours are "the great hope for the future," he believed, and teachers and parents should work together in those schools to

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*The object of the founders originally was to found a school which, by its environment, its methods, its opportunities, would develop [the] young for participation in citizenship—the world's work.*

"seek, discover, and develop the diversified strengths and gifts of all the children."<sup>2</sup>

Parker himself, born in New Hampshire in 1837, received only "scant formal education,"<sup>3</sup> and yet by age sixteen, he was a teacher himself, and a principal at the ripe old age of twenty-one. Returning from a spell of service in the Civil War and a stay of some years in Germany, Parker assumed the superintendency in Quincy, Massachusetts, and began to make a name for himself as a forward thinker. He would have enjoyed the organic language the Quincy School Committee later used to describe his influence on the district: "In five years he transformed our schools. He found them machines; he left them living organisms. Drill gave way to growth, and the weary prison became a pleasure house. He breathed life, growth and happiness into

our school rooms."<sup>4</sup>

Colonel Parker ended his career in Chicago, after having founded his first namesake school as a laboratory for the public school system. Both Francis Parker Schools, interestingly enough, have developed into exemplary independent coeducational schools, college preparatory institutions of the first order. They are an enduring legacy to the ideals of this energetic man, his absolute belief in the practically boundless potentials of American students, and the passionate commitment he made to their education.

*"Each member of society contributes to the good of all, lives for all, and receives from all that which all can give."*

Parker's model schools were intended as laboratories from which a nation might learn how best to educate its children. In its early years, the San Diego school was described as "the very essence of American ideals," expressing "the genius of the American people."<sup>5</sup> Colonel Parker's goal was to "educate into freedom," to prepare citizens for the awesome task of nation-building, the "choosing power of the vote."<sup>6</sup>

"The object of the founders originally," wrote Arlene Meyer Outcalt, the first principal of the school, "was to found a school which, by its environment, its methods, its opportunities, would develop [the] young for participation in citizenship—the world's work." Outcalt pointed out that like another great Chicago educator, John Dewey, Colonel Parker believed that "school is not a preparation, but life itself."<sup>7</sup>

To this end, the students at San Diego's Francis Parker School, in the early decades of the school, involved themselves quite wonderfully in the practicalities of what we might now consider adult life. To learn to manage finances, students were responsible for shopping for their own school supplies, and they were given and taught to balance checkbooks. As the student body grew and more space was needed, it was the students themselves who planned and then erected a new classroom on the campus. To produce the school newspaper, they researched and wrote articles; they also raised funds to buy a printing press, learned to use it, sold advertising space, and saw the entire procedure through, from start to finish.

It is in the pages of a student publication, the *Parker Post* of December 1917, that we hear early student voices articulating the school's philosophy of service. Ninth-grader Theiline McGee, at age fourteen, wrote the following, in her description of a visit from "the city nurse of San Diego":

Did you ever stop to think that right here at our own doors we have poor children who from day to day have not enough to eat and have not suitable clothes in which to go to school? Miss Taylor has made us realize it and we hope to make other people realize it by setting a good example and working as hard as we can to make up for lost time. Any body and every body can help, either by giving money, sewing for the babies or by giving us old clothes. . . . You can all do something for them and in that way you will be serving your city, your state, your country, and humanity.<sup>8</sup>

In the forthright request for help, in the clear understanding that the students can and should make a difference in the larger community, and in the fact that the request came in the context of what might today be considered an English or a journalism class, Theiline and her classmates demonstrated service learning in practice, probably before the term had even been invented.

*"The only way to educate a human being is to set him to work for others. The child is not in school to gain knowledge. He is there to live and put his life into the community in which he lives. This is the future of education. . . . The society of tomorrow is the school of today."*

In the busy and challenging years since the school's founding, Parker has not only survived, but thrived. From that initial enrollment of just three students, the school has grown to almost 1,200 happy, healthy, and talented young people. In the 1960s, the school added a permanent high school division, and in 1971, expanded to fill a second campus.

Today, facilities on both campuses develop at an energetic pace rivaled only by the growth of the students themselves. Life at all levels of the school is steeped in tradition and infused with a spirited love of the school. Parker graduates attend some of the finest colleges and universities this country has to offer, returning as alums to thank the teachers and staff for the excellent preparation—academic preparation, but also social and emotional—they received while students there.

How is this possible? How can an institution sustain itself through times both prosperous and lean, triumphant and turbulent, and still remain true to its purpose, true to itself and its mission? It's fairly simple, really, and the answer lies in the mission itself: "To provide a superior college-preparatory education in a di-

verse, family-oriented environment that meets the academic, social, creative, emotional, and physical needs of the individual student."

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*Central to a Parker education is the principle of individual responsibility: the responsibility to make the most of yourself and your opportunities, and the responsibility then to give back to the community around you.*

The emphasis here is on the whole student, within the whole community, and at various times the community is taken to be the classroom, the school, the family, the neighborhood, the city, the nation, and indeed, even the planet. Central to a Parker education is the principle of individual responsibility: the responsibility to make the most of yourself and your opportunities, and the responsibility then to give back to the community around you. In this complex and challenging world, which seems paradoxically to shrink even as it expands, we thrive only if we keep our eyes fixed on the common goal, and so at the philosophical heart of the school's mission lies the ideal of service.

*"If the teacher concentrates all his efforts upon the quality of action, the quantity of knowledge will take care of itself."*

The years since the school's founding have certainly been kind in the sense that the Francis Parker School has grown into a well-respected and important San Diego educational institution. At the same time, however, the increasingly frenetic pace of life at this end of the century has dictated certain changes in the life of the school, and it has, at times, been difficult to remain true to the founders' intent in the day-to-day running of the school. Specifically, the addition of the high school in the 1960s introduced a new and challenging dilemma: how would a school in which "unhealthy, feverish competition" was frowned upon, and in which there was "no contest for place or distinctions,"<sup>9</sup> incorporate into its students' lives the increasingly competitive college application and admissions process? How could a school whose aim it was to help "young people become intelligently acquainted with their environment" prepare those young people for an endeavor such as the SAT? How could a curriculum based on service, on learning by doing, provide a comfortable home for the rigors and rigidity of advanced placement courses?

In the early 1990s, Parker undertook an ambitious and comprehensive examination of every aspect of educational methodology, facilities usage, and time management at the school. Upper School Principal Patrick Mitchell, arriving on campus in 1991, made it his mission to educate himself on the history and philosophy of the school. Mitchell's interest was to see that the founding philosophy remained a central facet in daily life at the school. "Whatever we did," he says, "we wanted to be faithful to [the founders'] mission for the school, to produce scholars and citizens, people who participate in and contribute to society."

Gone were the leisurely days of student printing presses and classroom building, however. Graduation requirements now included three semesters of visual and performing arts, and a semester each of speech and health/fitness, in addition to the core requirements of English, math, social studies, language, and science. Outside the classroom, students were participating in the performing arts and interscholastic sports, running student government, producing a school newspaper and yearbook, and pursuing all manner of clubs and service activities. Not surprisingly, demands on their time were increasing alarmingly, as were stress levels among the students and their parents. Mitchell understood, however, that despite the demanding pace of life in the school, it would be necessary to add yet another element to the curriculum if the school were to stay true to its mission. A community service graduation requirement (seventy hours over four years) was added to the upper school program in 1994, and the school's first director of community service, Rebecca Benor, was appointed.

Parker Headmaster Lee Pierson proudly describes

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*Current Director of Community Programs Carol Jensen remembers the days before the graduation requirement as times when "students did a lot more than twenty hours a year of voluntary service," just because "it was the thing to do."*

the current upper school program as one that places "equal emphasis on academic achievement, creative opportunities, and character development," in keeping with the founding philosophy. The success of the balancing act required to keep the focus on the well-being of the whole individual, rather than simply on academic endeavors, is obvious in the assessment of

other independent school teachers. In evaluating Parker's math department earlier this year, a committee of teachers from Pasadena Polytechnic School and the Harvard-Westlake School observed: "The overall atmosphere in the classes was warm, supportive, and very stress-free. If teachers . . . feel pressured to keep up with a certain pace or to cover so much material in a day, they do not show it in the classroom; nor do the students seem unduly stressed, even though they are held to a *very* high standard of performance."<sup>10</sup>

*"It becomes the imperative duty of all to present the needed conditions to awaken the feeling of responsibility."*

Current Director of Community Programs Carol Jensen, a Parker parent, volunteer, and former director of alumni at the school, remembers the days before the graduation requirement as times when "students did a lot more than twenty hours a year of voluntary service," just because "it was the thing to do." The longstanding presence of several important service organizations on the campus—Interact (Kiwani's), Girls' League (Soroptimists), and SafeRides—made it easy for every student to find a place to give something to the community. She remembers in particular a 1992 Parker graduate, Sarah Goltz, who went on to Princeton and then to East Benin, Africa, on a Fulbright Fellowship. Sarah discovered, during her freshman year, an opportunity for service to the local community: the Linda Vista Boys' Club was in dire need of a fresh coat of paint. "It was great," Jensen remembers. "One person decided that she was going to get this done, and she got the entire upper school out there, and it was accomplished in one day." She taught by her example, said Jensen, that Parker students could "use the incredible opportunities they have to do things that are really good."

A few short years after Sarah's "painting party," director of community service Rebecca Benor outlined for the upper school students the "goals of a good education" as "the acquisition of information, instruction in citizenship, and the lessons of a moral life." Echoing Sarah Goltz, and Colonel Parker before her, Benor issued a reminder to Parker students: "By serving those less fortunate than you, you will learn an invaluable lesson, and those you help will gain from your caring."

The goal of an organized community service program and graduation requirement in the upper school, according to Mitchell, is to enable and encourage the students to "look closer at their communities, to peer in and see what's really going on. Sometimes we become inured to the problems around us," he says,

"either because we block out things that threaten us or a problem like homelessness grows slowly over time, and we don't realize how big it's become. These kids will be leaders in the community; they have the power to make a difference," he continues. "Many of them are blessed to come from families with opportunities and connections, assets the students will enjoy as adults. They can be a voice that will be heard, and the effect will be exponential. They can be real change makers."

Jensen-If you would both utilize the user-friendly software I installed at the first of the year, I wouldn't have this checkbook reconciliation nightmare every month. has made it a priority to involve parent volunteers as much as possible in the work their children do. "It's another way for parents to give to the school," she explains, and in her efforts to expand service options for the students, she has specifically targeted organizations with which the parent body is affiliated.

True service learning would, of course, place the students' service experience squarely within the context of curriculum, and reach into all areas of academic endeavor. A project involving work at a homeless shelter, for instance, might include an economic analysis of the causes and ramifications of homelessness in the community. It could involve publishing a newsletter, drawing plans for a new shelter, or studying *The Grapes of Wrath*. Mitchell wishes he were able to incorporate such a comprehensive and meaningful program into the upper school curriculum, rather than sending students out into the community for what may seem like isolated, individual experiences. "Providing free labor [in the form of hours of service]," he says, "is like putting a bandage over a sore: the remedy doesn't really filter up to address the real issue. Service learning aims to cure the disease that causes the sore."

And so within the context of a school like Parker, the goal is to give service a significance that helps it develop beyond "free labor" into a meaningful experience for the students, contextualized in the sense that they truly can make a difference in ways that might not have occurred to them without the experiences (i.e., the hours!) required by the curriculum. Students are each required to reflect on significant service experiences with an essay in order to receive credit for the hours, but neither Jensen nor Mitchell is content to stop there. One of Jensen's specific goals for the future is to build the bridge between off-campus service and the classroom more intentionally, to aim for the service-learning "cure" rather than the community service "bandage." She'd like the students to have a better sense of what they're doing before it happens, and a chance

afterward to discuss their discoveries, triumphs, and frustrations at greater length, perhaps in small groups or advisories.

*"Everything to help and nothing to hinder."*

Even within the constraints of the current upper school community service program, it's easy to find examples of golden moments when an individual or



*"Mom, Dad—if you would both utilize the user-friendly software I installed at the first of the year, I wouldn't have this checkbook reconciliation nightmare every month."*

group project outside the school informs or even creates a real learning moment in the classroom. In the spring of 1998, for instance, one small group's experience at a Habitat for Humanity house building profoundly altered and enriched an English class discussion. The class was studying the literary concept of satire, and having just finished reading Moliere's "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme," began watching Michael Moore's *Roger and Me*. This documentary chronicles the economic schism created by General Motor's drastic downsizing in 1985 and the ensuing devastation of so many levels of the community of Flint, Michigan. Having worked side by side with the proud owners of the new Habitat house, students' reading of characters and ideas in the film was better informed, more sensitive, and in fact roundly different than it might have been before the project; they were now able to see the complicated economics depicted in the film from a point of view markedly different from that of their own upbringing. Without that service experience, they might not have questioned some of the statements and attitudes displayed in the film. Jared D'Onofrio was the teacher in the classroom as well as the adviser who had accom-

panied the students to the Habitat project, and the influence of the service opportunity on the class discussion was clear to him. "Had it not been for those kids speaking up," he comments, "the conversation would have ended with all of the students simply agreeing with the women being satirized in the film. They would have missed the whole point."

On a significantly larger scale, Parker's entire freshman and sophomore classes left campus one morning in November, accompanied by faculty and parent volunteers on the first-ever classwide community service project. In conjunction with the Peninsula Athletic Club

laxed, laid-back kind of an atmosphere."

James Evans, president of the Peninsula Athletic Club and host for the morning's activities, lined up the larger groups of students across the ends of vacant lots and suggested that they descend on the NTC "like a horde of locusts," picking up every weed and piece of trash in their way as they marched across the property. At the time, students were puzzled by this use of their energies, because their individual efforts seemed insignificant. But as Evans comments sagely, "Everything has to start somewhere." The students, learning later that their combined efforts had filled four dumpsters with trash and other debris that had littered the fields and roadsides of the NTC, realized that they had, indeed, made a difference.

"If I had gone there by myself," said a freshman, Kristy Gillingham, in reflection on the project, "I couldn't have gotten nearly as much done, but working together with everyone in the grade showed me that no matter how large, the project could be accomplished. It was really rewarding," she adds. "We need to get out there and see how fortunate we are. We need to learn to give, rather than to always be the one receiving."

Colonel Parker would be pleased.

*"There is money enough, land enough, food enough and work enough for all mankind, and the problem of charity is the problem of justice as well—the problem of the right distribution of labor, the right distribution of effort. . . . This is true charity, not the sham which masquerades in its holy name, a panacea and a penance for the sins of the few against the many." CH*

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and San Diego Gas & Electric's "Students Doing Good Every Day" program, students assisted with a clean-up at the defunct Naval Training Center. A secondary goal was to involve the students in a bake sale and an "intergenerational croquet marathon" to benefit the Ocean Beach Women's Club, devastated by fire last year. With the help of grade-level teachers and advisers, Jensen arranged what she hopes will become an annual undertaking. Expectations were high as the event moved into its final planning stages; never had so many students been taken off campus at once to participate in a single project. "It's only the first time," admits Jensen, "but you have to do things, try them, and build on them for success."

Amanda Wheeler, Class of 2002 and one of the lucky few who played croquet with the members of the Ocean Beach Women's Club, appreciated both the opportunities and the tone of the morning. "The seniors were very involved, very light-hearted, and very interested in being with us," she says, "and it was a good dynamic. It was nice to be able to interact with them and get community service credit for it, in a re-

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1. Francis Wayland Parker, *1837-1902: Centennial, 1937* (Chicago: Millar Publishing Company, 1937). All italicized excerpts from Colonel Parker's writings are taken from this publication.

2. Francis W. Parker, quoted in Ethel Mintzer Lichtman, *The Francis Parker School Heritage* (San Diego: Francis Parker School, 1985), 6.

3. *Ibid.*, 1.

4. *Ibid.*, 4.

5. Rudolph Arlom, "This School Makes American Citizens," *San Diego Union Newspaper*, 1918.

6. Parker, 1837-1902, 7.

7. Lichtman, *Francis Parker School Heritage*, 16.

8. Theiline McGee, "Neighborhood House," *Parker Post*, December 1917.

9. Arlom, "This School."

10. Unpublished (in-house) assessment instrument