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LEARNING IN THE COMMUNITY

By John Formy-Duval and
Ellen Volland, Guest Editors

Many schools are like islands set apart from the mainland of life by a deep moat of convention and tradition. A drawbridge is lowered at certain periods during the day in order that the part-time inhabitants may cross over to the island in the morning and back to the mainland at night.

Why do these young people go out to the island? To learn how to live on the mainland. When they reach the island, they are provided with excellent books that tell about life on the mainland. . . .

One evening a year the island's lights burn late for an event called graduation. Then the islanders depart, never to set foot on the island again.

After the graduates leave the island for the last time, they are bombarded by problems of life on the mainland. Sometimes one of the graduates may mutter, "On the island I read something about that in a book."

William G. Carr to the
National Congress of
Parents and Teachers, 1942

COMMUNITY EDUCATORS refer fondly to William Carr's words as "the drawbridge analogy." As community involvement specialists, they are committed to keeping the drawbridge down, so that adults from the mainland can both provide and use resources in the school, and so that young people from the school can go regularly to the mainland, learning to apply—and understand—what they have read in their books.

In these days of reaffirming "the basics"—variously defined—in public education, there is a danger that academic pursuits may be separated from their reason for being—to help students develop the knowledge and skills to become effective, productive, caring adults, involved in their communities and their nation. High school volunteerism, or service learning, provides opportunities to reinforce in students' minds the need to learn the basic core curriculum through guided involvement in real-life roles and responsibilities. When basic learning is integrated with the needs of society, students can develop the zest for lifelong learning that characterizes active and responsible citizenship. Student service learning opens an untapped resource to the community and reaffirms the American tradition of school and community sharing with the family the responsibility of education. Community educators are in a position to help facilitate that kind of sharing through service learning.

Service learning is an experience for which both service and learning are important goals. The experience incorporates a carefully balanced relationship among student, school, and community: all parties must be "invested" in the planning, execution, and on-going evaluation of the program. Programs, then, are educationally sound and experientially balanced.

On March 31, 1982, high school students working through the North Carolina Youth Council conducted a public hearing they called, "A Hearing Identifying Barriers to and Incentives for Youth Involvement in Volunteer Educational Community Activities." Then-Governor James B. Hunt, Jr., state and local school officials, university professors, selected government workers, and representatives of youth organizations and programs testified before the student hearing panel on one of the four major topics: the pros and cons of giving academic credit for student volunteerism; barriers and incentives related to student volunteerism; school absentee policies; and exemplary student volunteer and internship programs. Both the adults and the students took the hearing seriously and acted promptly on the ensuing recommendations. One outcome was a governor-appointed study committee of adults and students to explore the question of giving academic credit for high school service learning.

With the help of student interns and volunteers from the

study committee, surveys were conducted to ascertain the extent of service learning in both public and private schools across the state and nation. Based on these data, a review of learning-theory literature, and much discussion, a *Service Learning* report was presented to the North Carolina State Board of Education, which approved it unanimously. The board instructed the State Department of Public Instruction to provide technical assistance to any local school system that wanted to develop service learning programs and policies. Every local school system and numerous community groups were sent guidelines and background information, as well as the study committee's recommendations:

- Schools should provide opportunities for any student who wishes to engage in a program of service learning beyond the conventional curriculum and to earn elective credit toward high school graduation.
- Schools and communities should work together to pursue service learning opportunities for and with students.
- Schools should facilitate opportunities for any student to participate in educational and governmental conferences, programs, and workshops that provide service learning experiences.
- These experiences should be considered an integral part of the curriculum, and the participating student should be allowed to make up any missed classroom work.

The guidelines developed by Governor Hunt's study committee several years ago are still valid, as evidenced by the articles on service learning that follow in this issue of the *Community Education Journal*. Successful programs appear to have these common components:

- The activity both satisfies the interest of the student and addresses a genuine and substantive need in the school or community.
- The service "costs" the student something; that is, it requires the student to invest himself or herself.
- Key persons (teacher, counselor, agency or organization staff person, student, parent) are designated as support/ coordinating team members; together they develop written goals and roles for each other.

- Appropriate orientation, training, and supervision are provided.
- Students keep journals on their activities and observations.
- Regularly scheduled seminars are held for students and school coordinators to process and reflect on what has been and is being learned.
- A plan for on-going as well as end-of-program evaluation is developed and implemented.

About one-third of the school systems in North Carolina indicated in the 1982-83 school year that they had service learning programs for students. Few of these offered academic credit, except to students who were office or library assistants. Despite strong state board endorsement, few local boards have initiated service learning programs since 1983. Those programs identified in the 1982-83 survey that had survived the longest reflected many of the components listed above.

In charging the study committee, Governor Hunt said:

Schools and communities have endless needs; we must be in the business of getting help to meet those needs. While we have many volunteers, the numbers are woefully inadequate for what needs to be done in our schools and communities. Young people can do lots of things, and we have a huge source of several thousand young people who can and ought to be involved. . . . I can't think of one single thing in this state that might turn loose more of a burst of new and very good, positive, creative energy to improve the state than by getting young people involved in innovative service learning experiences. I think they want to be involved. I think they would benefit from it. If this becomes known as the state where young people are involved by the hundreds of thousands, I wonder what our future could be.

BARRIERS obviously exist to the implementation of service learning, as Rob Shumer and others cogently point out in the following pages. The bureaucratic structure of educational institutions—including strongly held notions of what is worthy of being called "education"—is extraordinarily difficult to modify, much less change. Perhaps

service learning is "today's fad," as Lewis suggests. But, to take up Governor Hunt's question, what would our future be if more young people were meaningfully involved in their communities? Research indicates that people's attitudes change once their behavior changes, and experience demonstrates that once young people are involved in service learning opportunities, they want more of what Mother Teresa calls "the joy of service."

The decision to provide service learning opportunities to young people cannot be taken lightly. Many questions must be addressed by thoughtful planners. Should credit be given? Should service learning be curricular or extracurricular? Must the service be performed during traditional school hours? Should service be required or voluntary? Is the concept of service learning applicable to junior high or even middle school youngsters? Should service be required of all college-age youth? Is liability insurance an issue? How will success—or failure—be measured?

It is the hope of the guest editors that this issue of the *Community Education Journal* will stimulate the discussion, debate, and action necessary to bring community agencies (schools, social service agencies, libraries, colleges, recreation departments, volunteer organizations, churches, and businesses) together to plan and organize volunteer opportunities that will help young people learn about themselves and the world they live in.

No writer in this issue suggests that service learning is easy. The relevant question is whether it is worth the effort. The answer you will hear on these pages is a resounding yes.

Community educators—the draw-bridge people—should agree. □

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