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# History of the Service-Learning Requirement in Maryland

by Kathy Megyeri

SCHOOLS IN MARYLAND have long provided some opportunities for students to volunteer. There have been the usual walk-a-thons, canned-food drives, visits to the elderly, and tree-planting projects. Building on this tradition, in 1985 the Maryland State Board of Education enacted a requirement that all school systems offer courses and programs in community service, open to all students, for elective credit, to provide opportunities for students to reach beyond themselves to help others. Two hundred of Maryland teachers were trained by the state, and during the 1988–89 school year, over 1,000 students were engaged in community service projects for credit (Maryland Student Service Alliance).

Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, currently Lieutenant-Governor of Maryland, headed the Maryland Student Service Alliance that trained its teachers, but she believed Maryland should go one step further to mandate service for graduation. Her goal was “to teach kids that they could make a difference, to become good citizens, and to make them aware that they had something to offer” (Schneider). In 1993, under Townsend’s guidance and leadership, Maryland students who entered ninth grade were required to perform 75 hours of community service in order to graduate from high school.

Testimony from students and community agencies as to the benefits of service helped to educate and win support for service-learning. Student government associations in seven of the largest counties in Maryland voted in favor of the mandate. They argued that “service is a rare opportunity granted all too seldom to children to become a vital, instrumental part of their communities” (Townsend). Many students testified at the hearings that if someone or some event hadn’t encouraged them to serve in the first place — a parent, a teacher, an honor society, a confirmation, or an Eagle Scout requirement — they would never have known what pleasure service to others can be. Townsend testified that “until students have a chance to participate in the ways that democracy demands, they can never truly take to heart the lessons they are learning in class.” She said, “Children aren’t born knowing how to be citizens. Like learning to read or add or throw a ball, citizenship is something that should be taught and nurtured in school” (Townsend).

Students testified before the Education Subcommittee of the Maryland State House:

I do not see a problem mandating student service for we do not have a problem using the schools, roads, and libraries that our society provides. It is our intrinsic duty, not simply as students, but as citizens, to serve. Our schools try to teach us how to serve, which is much like trying to fly a plane without attaching its wings. When we learn through active experience, research tells us we retain 80% of our knowledge. And we retain 90% of what we teach each other. We need the learning we retain to make us more competitive in a shrinking global market. Service-learning is the way to go (Spurgeon).

After much lobbying and even more testifying before the Education Subcommittee at the Maryland Legislature in Annapolis by parents, administrators, teachers, agency personnel, and students who believed in the merits of the program, the requirement was passed in 1993. The State Board of Education defined service as:

Making a difference through the actions of caring for others through personal contact, indirect service, or civil action, either in the school or the community, with preparation and reflection (Maryland Student Service Alliance).

To diffuse criticism, Maryland’s Department of Education allowed the state’s 24 school districts to design their own plans of implementation based on their needs and desires (Schneider). My own school district, Montgomery County, uses the following definition:

Student service-learning is an unpaid activity within the curriculum, school, or outside community that provides service to an individual or group to address a school or community need. The activity must be developmentally appropriate and meaningful to the student (Montgomery County Public Schools).

Of course, there was an outcry against an additional graduation requirement that would pose hardships for the economically disadvantaged who had to work after school, for the handicapped who would have difficulty traveling to sites, and for the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students who have less command of the English language. Some critics were philosophically opposed to involuntary “servitude,” and “mandatory volunteerism,” an oxymoron, as they called it. Some members of the State Legislature tried to have the requirement overturned because they thought it was not “education.” Others challenged it for “limiting students’ freedom.” A top official of the state teachers’ union called it “slave labor,” and an op-ed piece in *The Wall Street Journal* argued that it violated child labor laws. To be meaningful, they said, service should be voluntary (Townsend).

A lawyer on the staff of the Institute for Justice, in Washington, D. C., made it his mission to challenge Maryland and other school districts that require community service. He con-

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tended that the 13th Amendment abolished slavery and involuntary servitude, that the service requirement violated the privacy of students by forcing them to expose personal philosophical beliefs, and that it interfered with parents' right to raise their children as they chose. He said, "The government cannot force you to serve others against your will without compensation," but his arguments have not been accepted by any court. A three-judge federal appeals court ruled unanimously last January that the requirement does not violate the 13th Amendment's prohibition against involuntary servitude. In rejecting the loss-of-parental-control claim, the court said that the program is rationally related to a school district's mission of education. In rejecting the claim that the requirement violates student privacy, the court said that students may volunteer with secular, non-partisan organizations if they do not wish to reveal their political or religious beliefs (*Education Week*). The U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal of appellate rulings, dismissing lawsuits filed by students against school systems in Pennsylvania, New York, and in North Carolina (Donnan).

Conversely, The American Alliance for Rights and Responsibilities in Washington, D. C., formed to promote civic responsibility, has defended the school districts requiring service. Suzanne Goldsmith, head of the Alliance's community service projects, said,

There is a lot of research that shows students learn best in a hands-on environment, and the purpose of service learning programs is not to take students' labor, but to educate them. Nothing in the Constitution says that homework must be completed between 8:00 and 2:00. Community service is just like homework for civics class (Donnan).

Now, finally, in 1996, students and parents have generally moved beyond complaining about the requirement to learning what the requirement entails, considering ways that students can fulfill the hours, and appreciating the learning that results from the experience. It hasn't been an altogether smooth transition, but it has been made easier by the fact that a student's service can take place outside the school setting such as weekend work at a homeless shelter or during spring break at a Habitat for Humanity project. Another model allows for students to perform service-learning co-curricularly with school groups such as student government, student-student tutoring, and through participation in school activities. In addition, teachers are becoming convinced of the ease with which service projects can be infused into the curriculum and that the requirement can be completed within the school day. For example, in my ninth-grade English classes, I teach Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The main character, Atticus Finch, says "You never really know a man until you walk in his shoes." After my students read the novel, they collected all sorts of used shoes, boots, sandals, and tennis shoes and wrote an essay for each about the type of person who probably wore such a pair. The essays were slid inside each refurbished pair and donated to charity. Such a simple project got us much publicity and made the September issue of *NEA Today*. Teachers throughout the U.S. wrote us and asked for details so they too could relate the novel to students' experiences.

Such experiences are convincing more people that Maryland's requirement is easy to implement because students have

so many choices of activities, and they usually select one that they are already interested in or have been exposed to. Some volunteer coordinators and teachers prefer that their students engage in direct service, in which they work face-to-face with a specific population such as the elderly, but others prefer indirect service which is performed "behind the scenes" such as fundraising or collecting articles for the homeless. Another type of service some choose is advocacy where students can direct their energy and support to affect policy-making, such as lobbying for environmental issues, animal rights, increased funding for Head Start programs, etc. (Maryland Student Service Alliance).

Our service-learning students are overwhelmingly engaged in care for elementary pupils, the elderly, the handicapped, and tutoring ESOL students. And we are finding that our large population of recent immigrants brings many of our most dedicated and enthusiastic volunteers. Their reflection pieces indicate that service-learning helps them adapt to America and offers them opportunities to be integrated into both their school's and their community's cultures.

260 ESOL pupils (12% of our total student population) from 43 countries and representing 28 languages are enrolled in our high school. The majority of these recent immigrant-students volunteer with severely and profoundly handicapped pupils at school, with frail and homebound elderly, and with residents at a nearby independent-living complex for those with physical limitations. We have found that our recent immigrants and foreign students are particularly needed and valued in two ways. First, they do not have to rely on verbal and written skills to interact daily with the handicapped pupils housed within our building. They teach these pupils to tell time, play board games to enhance their motor skills, instruct them on basic computer skills, push their wheelchairs to school activities, feed them snacks, teach them to order from a menu, pay their bills, and count their change at area restaurants, lead them in physical activities, and dress them for the long bus ride to their residences. The volunteers feel needed and wanted, and at the same time, they are helping to integrate these handicapped pupils into the larger student body.

Secondly, increasing numbers of immigrant elderly are moving into the senior centers in our area, but they often feel isolated and lonely because of their communication difficulties. We pair these elders with our foreign student volunteers, and successful matches result, particularly if both are from the same country or speak the same language.

As a reflection component, students write of the benefits and insights they receive from their experiences, often in their native languages for the benefit of other newcomers. Last year, a Korean television production team filmed our school's volunteers. The Korean language has no equivalent of the word "volunteer," so the fact that our students are able to achieve academic excellence, work part-time, and still volunteer proved fascinating and educational to the Korean viewing audience. In another successful project, our ESOL students who had a more advanced command of English translated a local hospital's pre-operative information booklets into other languages such as Korean, Bengali, Spanish, and Russian. The project was so successful that other hospitals in the area are also enlisting ESOL students to translate

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signs, directions, and documents into languages other than English. The students put many hours into translating, but they all agree that it is time and effort well-spent because the people who need these booklets and signs appreciate being able to read them in their own language. Thus, the service-learning program has certainly given our immigrant population a sense of belonging to the community and a personal sense of value as volunteers. As our state and county populations become more diverse, we must support programs that incorporate them even more into school and community programs.

The 1992 Gallup Survey on Volunteering found that youth from sixth to 12th grades who are involved in service just one hour or more a week are about half as likely to be involved in the negative behaviors of drinking, drug use, smoking, vandalism, and skipping school (Independent Sector). I wish I could extrapolate such specific findings about our school's students who volunteer, but it is extremely difficult to qualitatively measure the results of students' engagement in service. I can only point to two indicators that have demonstrated dramatic results at my school. First, the number of students who return to perform additional service beyond the required 75 hours (and a .5 practical arts credit) is surprising all of us. So many students are now accumulating hours beyond the required 75 that a special award will be attached to their graduation certificates beginning in June of 1997. Our school system's computer program is currently being modified to accept 1,000 or more hours for some of our most dedicated volunteers. Previously, it could only record up to 999 hours!

Secondly, the reflection pieces students write at the conclusion of service to describe their activities are so poignant and moving that we share them with others engaged in service activities and with those who benefit from the experience. The pieces describe the service, explain why the student performed it, the difference their service made to the individual or community, and the benefits they, the students, received from the experience. These reflection pieces repeat a number of themes: Students admit going into the service relationship afraid and filled with stereotypes, and that without prodding by teacher, parent, peer, or the graduation requirement, they probably wouldn't have become service providers. They carry over the lessons and skills they have learned from service to other facets of their lives. Repeatedly, they admit that their service efforts improve their communication with parents or grandparents, they understand others better, and they profit from dealing with people they otherwise would not have met. Lastly, they admit they have changed, that they receive more from the experience than they give. They write that they are less fearful of people unlike themselves; they have become more accepting, willing to learn, self-reliant, flexible, dependable, motivated, sensitive to others' needs, and trusting. They recognize that they have increased their skills in problem solving, networking, troubleshooting, time management, public speaking, training, and public relations. Students' reflection pieces encompass every conceivable service and from these papers come further ideas for service-learning projects and insights into students' present concerns. Our students have recommended plans for monitoring streams, creating nature trails, becoming

companions to residents of nursing homes, advocating for topical issues such as gun control and crime prevention, presenting skits on drugs and pregnancy to their peers, holding conflict resolution and peer mediation programs, restoring neglected cemeteries, running errands for the elderly, working in area soup kitchens, supervising latch-key children, and more.

These reflection pieces are accurate and powerful descriptions about the good that students do to show administrators, local news reporters, parents, a community's newcomers or visitors what "the school's volunteers are doing." Local, state and national service-learning projects that students complete can also be analyzed and discussed within the context of letter writing and speech making, additional steps in the advocacy process.

Our greatest surprise was discovering the extent of service-learning that our freshmen are already engaged in when they enter ninth grade from middle schools, and how much they want to talk about it. A number of our high school students told younger pupils and their parents about their current involvement, what they had learned and how much they recommended their activities to others. Tutoring to eliminate illiteracy and improve SAT scores, reducing poverty among the young, fighting crime, cleaning up dangerous highway construction sites, and decreasing teens' automobile accident rates and drug use are local community problems that our students are currently addressing. It is clear that the service-learning mandate is being integrated into our curriculum.

Some of the issues I deal with as volunteer coordinator are promoting the benefits of service-learning, recording hours on permanent record cards, and addressing the all-important issues of transportation and liability that arise at every discussion of service-learning. According to county school policy, our service participants are not allowed to add their travel time and sleep time in their hour count if they are engaged in outdoor education programs for elementary students and drama and music performances away from school; private homes cannot be service sites because of liability issues; and parents cannot sign a verification of the Student Service Learning form for their own children. My own county school system has decided that political activities count as service as do religious activities as long as religious instruction or participation in worship service is not included. All agencies that host our volunteers must be registered with the school system so that for-profit groups do not take advantage of our students.

Admittedly, the 24 school districts in Maryland are implementing the service-learning requirement differently based on their needs and approaches. One criticism I still encounter is that the service students often perform is too menial such as landscaping and painting lines on parking lots. Another criticism is that some high schools recognize activities other high schools wouldn't consider service such as serving on student government and prom committees or working on "tech crew" for student play performances or serving on peer-mediation panels. Still another criticism is that, in many cases, parents and students insist the recording of service hours include one-fourth or one-half hour increments, and the recording of served hours becomes a nightmare, an awesome task for volunteer coordinators, particularly in high schools that enroll over 2,000 students. Thus, our state and my own school system must continue to monitor and refine

the requirement to work toward consistency and uniformity (Schneider). We are, however, clearly on the right track.

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*Kathy A. Megyeri teaches English and is the volunteer Coordinator at Sherwood High School in Sandy Spring MD.*

# We Listen We Hear

*by Diana Hayman*

NSEE HAS ATTRACTED SMALL but increasing numbers of K-12 teachers to its membership, but not numbers sufficient to yield, through the voting process, representation on the NSEE Board; they have simply lacked a critical voting mass.

In a membership organization such as ours, the interests and concerns of the large majority can overshadow the concerns and interests of a minority unless we, as an organization, go out of our way to hear them. The Board heard at The National Conference in Utah last November and took seriously a plea from the K-12 Network that representation on the NSEE Board was important. The Board realized that this was a broader issue than just for the current K-12 membership. Board representation would be important not only to show potential, as well as current members, that one of them is "at the table" when conference, research, grant-seeking, and strategic planning agendas are formulated, but also because it is a symbol of our commitment to these sectors.

Sometimes individuals and organizations are asked not to conduct business as usual; and so the Board, at its meeting in Snowbird, Utah, voted to change the nomination process for Board elections to create four distinct categories under which members could be nominated to ensure representation on the Board by constituent groups with small, but nonetheless important voting numbers.

We did this with the expectation that current as well as potential members would see a welcoming and inclusive "society," one that is not passive to their presence and interests, but one that actively draws in its new members and looks for ways to make theoretical as well as practical connections with their own practice: Our educational interests are indeed the same, though our forms and levels are different. We expect that representation on the Board and participation on its committees and working groups will enrich our deliberations and policy making. We hope this visible presence and its potential programmatic results will attract others to our vision for education at all levels.

We cannot be sure of the ultimate outcome of the Board's action, but it may have had at least one unintended consequence: we have received more nominations (of very high quality) and by a considerable margin, than ever before.

*Diana Hayman is President of the NSEE Board of Directors.*

## Letter from the Editor

IN THIS, my last issue, I would like to thank all the many contributors over the last five years who have made my editing task such a rewarding and enlightening one. I thank you, too, for putting up with my questions, requests for changes and additions, and, for most of you, meeting my deadlines! I want also to thank, especially, Allen Wutzdorff for having confidence that I could help move us from *Experiential Education* to the *NSEE Quarterly*. I learned an enormous amount about editing and publishing because of his encouragement and strict insistence on professional excellence. Sally Migliore, Gita Gulati-Partee, Holly Ivel, and Annette Wofford have offered me their assistance, advice, and support, as have all the NSEE staff, with affection and patience. I will miss the excitement of being in the middle of NSEE's change and growth. I will miss all my good friends. But you, dear readers, will have in Mark Andrew Clark, a wonderful new Editor who will move this publication in new and insightful ways.

## Guidelines for Contributors

THE DEADLINES for receipt of articles and announcements you wish to submit for possible publication in upcoming issues are listed below. Once a decision is made about your submission, the Editor will contact you.

Please submit typed, double-spaced hard copies of your articles, no longer than 16 pages (4000 words), using APA editorial style, and, if possible, send your IBM compatible 5.25" or 3.5" disk, formatted on Wordperfect 5.1 or 5.0 or ASCII, using 12 font or 10cpi. Indicate source and page number for any quotations used; give complete reference information. Include a brief biography. Please mail your items to the new editor, Mark Andrew Clark, The Philadelphia Center, North American Building, 121 South Broad Street, Philadelphia PA 19107-4577.

### **NSEE Quarterly Deadlines**

- Winter ..... September 1
- Spring ..... December 1
- Summer ..... March 1
- Fall ..... June 1