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## Service: Linking School to Life

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# SERVICE: LINKING SCHOOL TO LIFE

By Ernest L. Boyer

**T**HE current folklore has it that teenagers are selfish, lazy, and undisciplined. The image of an apathetic, self-indulgent generation simply does not square with reality. It does, however, mask the real youth problem in this nation. Former U.S. Commissioner of Education Harold Howe II (1981) captured it powerfully when he called American youth

an island in our society. The message it receives from the adult world is, "We have no use in our economic system for you young people between the ages of 12 and 18, and precious little use in our community affairs. So we suggest you sit quietly, behave yourselves, and study hard in the schools we provide as a holding pen until we are ready to accept you into the adult world."

During our study of the nation's high schools (Boyer 1983), I became convinced that the problems of our schools are inextricably tied to this larger problem—the feeling on the part of many of our youth that they are isolated, unconnected to the larger world outside their classrooms. Again and again during our study, we met young people who saw little, if any, connection between what they were doing and learning in school and the communities in which they lived.

More to the point, perhaps, is that the spirit outside the school shapes powerfully the climate within the school itself. Students do not see formal education as having a consequential relationship to who they are, or even, in a fundamental way, to

what they might become. Like the rest of their world, the school is run by adults. Students do not often feel a responsibility to the institution where they spend many of their waking hours, nor are they encouraged to see ways to contribute to the workings of the school. Today it is possible for American teenagers to finish high school without ever being asked to participate responsibly in life in or out of the school—never encouraged to spend time with lonely older people, help a child who has not learned to read, clean up litter on the street, or even do something meaningful at the school itself.

To encourage young people to become more fully involved in the communities of which they are a part, we proposed in *High School* that every student complete a service requirement—a new "Carnegie unit" that would involve them in volunteer work in the community or at school. The Carnegie unit, as historically defined, measures time spent in class—academic contact time. This new unit puts emphasis on time in service, but it is not bound rigidly by calendar or clock. We suggested that a student spend not less than 30 hours a year, a total of 120 hours over four years, in order to qualify for one Carnegie service unit. Students could fulfill this service requirement evenings, weekends, and summers.

I believe such a service program taps an enormous source of talent, lets young people know that they are needed, and helps students see a connection between what they learn and how they live. The goal is to

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*The problems of our schools are inextricably tied to the feeling on the part of many of our youth that they are isolated, unconnected to the larger world outside their classrooms.*

help students see that they are not only autonomous individuals but also members of a larger community to which they are accountable.

Since the Carnegie Foundation proposed the new Carnegie unit three years ago, we have been encouraged by the response. School districts from coast to coast have expressed interest in the idea, and new programs have been launched. A survey of 1,100 public and private high schools conducted for the Carnegie Foundation's special report, *Student Service: The New Carnegie Unit* (Harrison 1987) showed that about one-quarter of the service programs now in existence have been started since 1983. The same survey found that 80 percent of today's students who are engaged in community or in-school service do so not for career orientation but for altruistic reasons.

This humane aspect of volunteer work becomes apparent in talks with students who participate in service programs. A young girl attending Hudson, Ohio, High School, who helps retarded children, said: "I like to see people gain from what I can do for them. I like myself better for helping them."

A boy whose high school offered a little academic credit and a little scholarship money in return for volunteer service in a nursing home said: "It's too much work for the credit and the money, but I just enjoy it. It's one of the best things I've ever done."

A student who didn't have much self-assurance before becoming a community volunteer said: "I used to wonder what I could do, because I don't think of myself as pretty or popular. Now I realize I have a lot to give. I used to say, 'Just let me lead my life,' but now I look around and see a world that needs me."

A boy who tutors immigrant children in English said: "I don't mind giving up my Saturdays because I'm learning, too. It's a very satisfying experience."

**C**OLLEGE STUDENTS, too, have found satisfaction in serving. In our most recent study, *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* (Boyer 1986), we learned that a growing minority of today's college students believe they can make a difference and are reaching out to help others. In a national survey of 5,000 undergraduate students,

52 percent reported that their high school provided an opportunity for community service. And about half participated in some form of service activity during their college years. We recommend in our report that every student complete a service project—involving volunteer work in the community or at the college—as an integral part of his or her undergraduate experience.

Schools and colleges have adopted a variety of service experiences and strategies. At least two major cities, Atlanta and Detroit, have made the completion of a service project a high school graduation requirement. Several states, including Maryland and California, are considering the addition of a service component to the curriculum in all their high schools. In a number of other states, legislators, educators, public officials, and business leaders are joining forces to encourage young people on both the high school and college levels to undertake community service.

The success of local school service programs has given added momentum to the drive for initiatives on the federal level. Senator Claiborne Pell (D-RI) has introduced the National Service and Education Demonstration Act, a plan that would authorize \$30 million a year for five years to provide education benefits for community service work or military service. On the House side, Rep. Leon Pa-

#### CONGRESS LOOKS AT YOUTH SERVICE

Rep. Leon Panetta (D-CA) is the chief House sponsor of the Voluntary National Youth Service Act of 1987 (H.R. 460), which would authorize matching federal grants to state and local youth service programs. Other bills, including those sponsored by Daniel Moynihan (D-NY), Claiborne Pell (D-RI), Dale Bumpers (D-AL), and Bill Bradley (D-NJ) in the Senate, and David McCurdy (D-OK), Robert Torricelli (D-NJ), and Morris Udall (D-AZ) in the House, suggest that some federal encouragement of youth service (perhaps in the form of college loan forgiveness or deferral in exchange for service) may be the subject of national debate in the forthcoming election year.

netta (D-CA) has introduced the Voluntary National Youth Service Act, which would support and improve current state youth service programs by offering matching federal grants. In all, a half-dozen measures related to youth service have been introduced in the House and Senate this year.

In a recent issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, distinguished education journalist Anne C. Lewis (1987) wrote: "To put substance into a campaign against illiteracy, to help the elderly, to meet the needs of disadvantaged children, to make the environment safer and more pleasant for citizens—all of these are worthy causes that could use the energies and enthusiasm of young people."

**F**rom our own study of school service in local schools, several principles are beginning to emerge that administrators should consider in embarking on a service program.

**A service program begins with clearly stated educational objectives.**

A service program is rooted in the conviction that schooling at its best concerns itself with the humane application of knowledge to life. Service is concerned with helping others, but, above all, it is concerned with improved learning. It is about helping students to discover the value of the curriculum, and to see that, in the end, formal learning must be considered useful not just economically but socially as well.

The point is this: altruism can best be appreciated as an experience rather than an abstraction. Semantic quarrels about the meaning of altruism aside, service will be no less valuable to those who acquire it as a requirement than to those who volunteer for it.

**A service program should be carefully introduced and creatively promoted.**

From our surveys it is clear that thoughtful people differ, not over the notion of service, but over how—or whether—it fits in the program of formal education. Further, there often are procedural barriers to be considered. To move too far too fast may lead only to confusion. A cautious beginning is appropriate. Several key teachers and student leaders might be brought together at first to consider the idea, define the goals, and shape a plan by which a service

program could be experimentally introduced.

If a few selected projects are successfully completed, the students involved and those who have been helped might offer testimonials to other students and teachers, describing the program and providing both information and inspiration. Since we have testimonials in schools honoring those who are successful in athletics, is it unthinkable to have special convocations to honor those who have helped their fellow human beings?

Service activity should be directed not just to the community but also toward the school itself.

We were reminded time and time again that students see the school as belonging to adults. They are expected to follow rules imposed by principals and teachers, but there is no sense of ownership in the process. Further, high school students remain relatively passive from the beginning to the end of the experience. We urge that the notion of service focus more directly on the school itself, through tutoring, of course, but also through other tasks, so that students begin to discover what it takes to make a school work and accept a more active and responsible role. Teaching is the most effective way to learn, and as students gain knowledge and experience, they should understand the obligation they have to pass on what they have learned.

**A service program should be something more than preparation for a career.**

Students may supervise children in a playground without planning to be physical education teachers or coaches; they may stuff envelopes for a charity mailing without planning to work in an office; and the list goes on. Students who engage in such activities obviously perform useful functions and relieve professionals for duties requiring special training and experience. Students in such settings may derive profound satisfaction from their direct contacts with those who benefit from their help and from knowing they are participating in something worthwhile. These values are important in life whether one's service is ultimately related to a career or not.

**Students should not only go out to serve; they should also be asked to write about their experience and, if possible, to discuss with others the lessons they have learned.**

Almost all service experiences cultivate such laudable personal traits as punctuality and reliability, the capacity to see a task through to completion, and the ability to get along well with others. Students, time and time again, speak of personal fulfillment and discovering their own strengths and worth.

Service is not just giving out, it is also gaining insight. There will be joy and satisfaction, and the pain of

frustration, too. In any event, if students are to be educationally affected by service, they should be asked to comment on their experience and explore with a mentor and fellow students how the experience is related to what they have been studying in school.

In all of this, the goal is to help students consider the connection between what they learn and how they live. The spirit of student service was captured best, perhaps, by Vachel Lindsay (1964) when he wrote,

. . . It is the world's one crime its babes grow dull . . .  
Not that they starve, but starve so dreamlessly,  
Not that they sow, but that they seldom reap,  
Not that they serve, but have no gods to serve,  
Not that they die, but that they die like sheep. □

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## LEARNING THROUGH SERVICE



Pearsontown Pride, a simple service program, is building community spirit and school pride at Pearsontown Elementary School in Durham County, North Carolina.

Principal Joanne Edelman read Ernest Boyer's articles on service learning and recognized the potential for creating a cooperative environment in a seriously overcrowded school. At the opening assembly in September, Edelman noted that the school had 1,050 students in a building designed for 850. If we can help one another, we can have an exceptional year, she told the students. She announced that all students would be given opportunities to help out. The kids have responded enthusiastically.

Among the service projects are plant watering (the plants, rooted by Edelman's 84-year-old mother, decorate the halls and lobby), fingerprint detecting (once a week

younger students roam the halls with sponges and cleaners, looking for fingerprints and smudges), and kindergarten helping (4th and 6th graders, for example, return empty lunch boxes to the cafeteria each day).

Photos by John Formy-Duval.

