SERVICE:
LINKING SCHOOL TO LIFE

By Ernest L. Boyer

The 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 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

Ernest L. Boyer is president of the Princeton-based Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Senior Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University. He was formerly U.S. Commissioner of Education and Chancellor of the State University of New York.

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.”

COLLEGE 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 Panetta (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.”

From 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...
Learning through Service

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.

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