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The Value of Community-Service Programs

By John H. Buchanan

When both President Bush and Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts assume leading roles in a new national movement, there is reason to believe that something significant may be happening.

Such appears to be the case with the growing interest in Washington and elsewhere in youth-focused community-service programs.

By providing mechanisms through which young people are encouraged to volunteer in a wide variety of service projects, such programs can reaffirm the responsibilities of citizenship at a time when the values of citizen participation are in decline, especially among many younger Americans.

During his Presidential campaign, Mr. Bush spoke of the need to regenerate interest among young people in serving others, and he outlined a proposal toward that end.

In much the same spirit, Mr. Kennedy recently introduced community-service legislation stressing a school-based approach, saying that "the 1990's can be the decade when we rediscover the importance of giving something back to the country."

There is disturbing evidence to suggest the need for renewal of these values. The downward trend in voting—a minimal test of citizenship—is a case in point. Americans who do not even vote are unlikely to be involved in other aspects of civic life—and participation hit a 64-year low in the last Presidential election, when barely half of those eligible went to the polls.

But the decline in the voting of young people has been especially dramatic, dropping steadily since 18-year-olds were first eligible to vote in 1972. In the 1986 mid-term elections, for example, fewer than 17 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds voted, and in the 1988 election, only 36 percent turned out, a drop of nearly 5 percent from 1984.

Last summer, People for the American Way sponsored a series of focus groups among 18- to 24-year-old nonvoters to gain a better understanding of why so many young Americans have dropped out of the democratic process.

Among other findings, the informal discussions revealed that the adult world has not provided these young people with an appreciation of what it means to be a citizen in a democracy.

The vast majority of the focus-group participants recalled few family dinner-table conversations about politics, and a number were incredulous that anybody would actually watch a Presidential address on television. As one young man volunteered about the lack of interest in his home: "I don't know about anybody else, but when the President comes on TV, we turn the TV off."

If parents of these youths did not provide models or inspire interest in active citizenship, the students also gave poor marks to the institutions with which they came in contact, including the schools. When asked which subjects they liked best and least, these young adults characterized social-studies courses as "dull" with disheartening frequency.

"I guess they tried to teach you the formation of the government and how it was laid out," one participant said. "But, man, it was boring."

These responses were consistent with the findings of our 1987 study of civics and gov-



Thomas Tilton

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ernment textbooks most used in public school. Judging the books bland and uninspiring, an expert panel found that they gave little attention to the critical role of citizen participation in a democracy.

In many communities, another contributing factor to nonparticipation is the erosion of mediating institutions such as neighborhood organizations, churches, labor unions, and political parties.

In years gone by, these institutions provided a bridge between the individual and the larger community—and a sense of purpose and definition of the common good. Today, however, an increasing number of adults lack "a way into" community life—and there is a spill-over effect among the school-age population.

A recent study of American high schools by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching reported that, "time and again, students complained that they felt isolated, unconnected to the larger world."

And Ernest L. Boyer, president of the foundation, suggested that schools have not yet addressed this important problem. "We were struck during our study that teenagers can go through 12 years of formal education without becoming socially engaged, without spending time with older people who may be lonely, helping a child who has not learned to read, cleaning up the litter on the street, or even rendering some useful service to the school itself. And this life of detachment occurs at the very time students are deciding who they are

and where they fit."

To be sure, there are notable exceptions to this profile. School-based community-service programs dot the national landscape. Most are voluntary, although some public schools and an estimated 25 percent of independent private schools require such involvement for graduation.

Studies of community-service programs—including those based in schools—have found that participants regard their experiences as both personally rewarding and helpful to their careers. The researcher K.P. Luchs reported that after only 30 hours of service work, involved students "displayed significantly more positive attitudes toward others, a greater sense of efficacy and self-esteem, and larger gains in career planning [than nonparticipants]."

For many students, textbook readings become more relevant when they can be related to life experiences. And as researchers have shown, community service provides certain job-readiness skills, such as the experience of working cooperatively in a group setting, that traditional didactic instruction often does not offer.

Continued on Page 24

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The Value of Community-Service Programs

Continued from Page 21

In 1986, researchers from the federal ACTION agency polled participants in the Young Volunteers Program, a national program enrolling about 40,000 young people, ages 14 to 22, from low-income families. A high percentage (73 percent) expected to continue to do volunteer work as adults, but even more (91 percent) said they would encourage others to be volunteers.

Both President Bush's and Senator Kennedy's initiatives are intended to expand voluntary community-service opportunities for young people and to highlight the worth of such activities.

The President's program, "Youth Entering Service," will be unveiled later this year.

Senator Kennedy's legislation, "Serve America: the service-to-America act of 1989," would provide \$100 million for each of five years in start-up grants for educational institutions and community-based agencies to create or expand service opportunities for students from kindergarten through college.

The grants, administered by state departments of education, could also be used to foster the participation of out-of-school youths who are in job-training programs. Although no federal funds could be used to pay individual participants, stipends funded by nonfederal sources would be permissible.

All federal agencies would be re-

sponsible for developing youth-service opportunities in existing programs. And to further heighten the visibility of these volunteer efforts, the legislation would create "Presidential awards for service" to honor outstanding programs as well as individuals who contribute 150 hours or more each year to community service.

Mr. Kennedy's bill has received an enthusiastic response from a broad range of education groups. Indeed, the sort of school-based community service that it would facilitate holds great potential both as a means of stimulating citizen participation at an early age and as a complement to traditional classroom instruction.

Several other community- or national-service bills have also been introduced in the Congress, but unlike Mr. Kennedy's, most target a postsecondary-school audience.

For example, Senators Sam Nunn of Georgia and Charles Robb of Virginia, and Representative Dave McCurdy of Oklahoma are sponsors of legislation that is essentially a new G.I. Bill of Rights expanded to include civilian as well as military service to the nation. Entitled the "citizenship and national service act," the bill would, over a five-year period, phase out virtually all federal student loans and grants, and replace them with a voucher system tied to service in a "citizens corps."

And under legislation introduced by Senator Barbara A. Mikulski of

Maryland, young people of all ages would be eligible to participate in a national-service program based on a National Guard model. Volunteers would be enrolled for three to six years, during which they would work two weekends a month, plus two

weeks in the summer. For each year served, a volunteer would receive a \$3,000 stipend that could be used toward retiring student-loan debts or for a down payment on a house.

Senator Kennedy's approach—and I hope President Bush's as well—has the important advantage of encouraging service at a young age and, at the same time, of relating that exper-

ience to school-based learning.

Because of the many changes in our society, our schools have a new and important role in citizenship training: instilling among young people a commitment to be active, involved, conscientious citizens. One of the most effective ways of reaching this goal is a program of community service. ■

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