

12-1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Cloud, John, "Involuntary Volunteers: Public schools are starting to require students to serve their communities. Is that too much to ask?" (1997). *Service Learning, General*. 295.

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Involuntary Volunteers

Public schools are starting to require students to serve their communities. Is that too much to ask?

By JOHN CLOUD BALTIMORE

AS A STUDENT LAST YEAR AT BALTIMORE'S Dunbar High, Christina Mullins knew she wouldn't be able to graduate unless she put in the 75 hours of community service required of all students by the state of Maryland. So she volunteered in the obstetrics-gynecology department at nearby Johns Hopkins University. It would be a good way, she thought, to accumulate hours and also get an insider's look at a medical career.

But she mostly saw the inside of a file cabinet. "I was filing papers all day—eight hours—for free," says Mullins. "Do you know how boring that is? And I couldn't get a job because I had to get my hours. I had no money in 1996."

Eventually, Mullins more than met the requirement, racking up 500 hours when she added community events where she played in the school jazz band. But she doesn't think community service should be a prerequisite. "You're just forcing it on us, and people don't get as much out of that," she says.

Students across the U.S. are about to find out if she's right. Mandatory volunteerism, once the province of chichi private academies with a runaway sense of noblesse oblige, has become the latest reform fad in public schools. Though Maryland's statewide requirement is unique, nationally almost one-fifth of students surveyed last year said they attend schools that mandate service. Even cash-strapped urban schools are joining in. In September, Chicago announced that it will demand 40 volunteer hours from its students, starting next year. Philadelphia officials have debated similar mandates, and Miami began requiring 75 hours of service in 1996.

Proponents say the volunteer work will help reconnect frayed communities by showing young citizens that they can make a difference. "Since the Reagan years, many people just don't care," says Terry Thomas, who teaches a class on service at Carver Vocational-Technical School in Baltimore. "The only way to get people back into the community is to teach it."

Still, as the twisted logic of its name

would lead you to expect, mandatory volunteerism has ignited battles. Some parents say it's their job, not the schools', to teach values. "It reminds me of something they used to do in the Soviet Union: 'Every Saturday, you will volunteer to help the greater glory of the state,'" says Barrie Ciliberti, father of four and a Republican legislator in Maryland's House of Delegates. But his side has lost so far in both legislatures and courts. Ciliberti and others have fought in vain to end the mandate since the board of educa-

as the first senior class under the mandate approached graduation, Maryland officials issued monthly tallies of each school district's progress on the service obligation. Baltimore was always dead last in the state.

How have some Baltimore students fulfilled the requirement? Senior Leanda High teaches a popular dance class three days a week in one of the city's toughest neighborhoods. Others' commitment is thinner: each Thanksgiving, students rush to help local celebrity-activist Bea Gaddy feed the homeless for a day. This year, one student says he was told he could earn hours for playing trombone at Baltimore Ravens football games.

For many students, in short, what started out as a noble push for civic-mindedness has turned into a mad dash for a report card showing 75 hours. And facing a new load of paperwork to verify that stu-

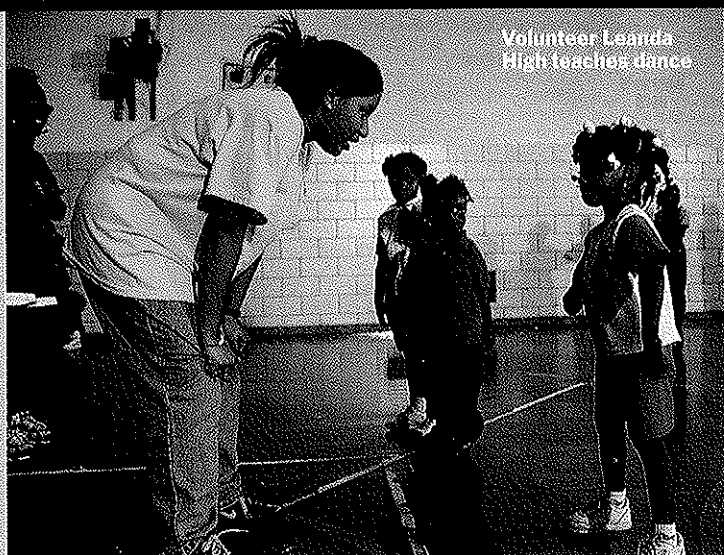
COERCED LABOR? Most students like the idea of community service, but not if it's required

91% of students polled said they think they should be "encouraged" to participate in community service

75% said they learned more during community service than in a typical class

BUT ONLY 36% said they think students should be required to participate in community service

Source: Survey of 608 middle and high school age students for the Center for Human Resources, Brandeis University



Volunteer Leanda High teaches dance

BRAD MAREL—GAMMA LIAISON FOR TIME

tion created it in 1992. Judges across the country have consistently ruled in favor of schools when parents have sued to exempt their kids. And the Supreme Court has declined to review three lower-court rulings that okayed the obligations.

Chicago's move toward required service raises a new set of complications. Can struggling urban schools afford to build good community-service programs—ones that count hours, find worthwhile volunteering opportunities and make sure the students aren't toiling at filing cabinets? And should inner-city students be asked to shove aside family duties and needed jobs—to say nothing of homework—to make room for the new requirement?

Baltimore's troubled schools, which were recently bailed out with \$254 million in state aid, offer mixed answers. Last year,

students did the work, schools have found it easier to count in-school activities like band and math club, even though that takes the "community" from the "service."

Because of such problems, experts like Marilyn Smith, a Clinton Administration official who supervises federal grants for local service programs, are pushing a reform called "service learning," which tries to infuse volunteerism into each class. Biology students might plant flowers at a nursing home, for example. Such embellishments of curriculum are sure to offend back-to-basics types, especially in city schools trying to raise test scores. Some of those traditionalists are the students themselves. "A lot of us just don't have the time, with jobs and stuff," says Deitra Goldern, a Carver senior. In her case, "stuff" means preparing for the SAT. ■