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Sharing the "Spirit of '76" with America's Young People

by Bob Dole and John Glenn

The genius of America lies in citizen service. When American colonists signed the Declaration of Independence during the summer of 1776 they didn't just pronounce themselves free of English rule, they also created a new kind of civic leadership.

We tend to view our founding generation as oil portraits and marble busts, but these real, flesh-and-blood people became heroes because they forged a new understanding of citizenship not just for Americans but for millions across the globe. We know the names of Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and John and Abigail Adams because they took risks to right wrongs others didn't see or wouldn't act upon.

How do we make certain the power of this example comes alive in each new generation?

Powdered wigs and knee breeches are part of history, but civic action is as necessary today as it was 227 years ago. Young people have made a good start by volunteering in their schools and neighborhoods in very high numbers. Yet, there's more we can do to connect their service to the problems that voluntarism is meant to solve.

To pass on the "Spirit of '76" to this rising generation, we must take three steps. First, we must recommit to the "public purpose" of education by ensuring that our schools serve as a training ground for responsible citizenship. Now is the right moment to re-affirm schools' mission of not only teaching academic skills and preparing good workers, but also training young people as citizens.

Parents and community leaders should call upon school superintendents, school boards, and principals to strengthen how their schools support young people's civic development. They can start by reading recent reports by the National Commission on Service-Learning (chaired by Senator Glenn) and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, both of which recommended increasing students' opportunities to learn service in school.

Second, we need to connect young people's service experiences to their learning of civics and history. Polls show that many Americans cannot remember the most crucial dates in our history. We both have the privilege of knowing firsthand that learning history is best accomplished by living history.

A powerful method of teaching called "service-learning," now practiced in about one-third of American schools, connects classroom instruction to community service. Research has shown that classroom lessons are more engaging when tied with projects that meet both learning goals and community needs. Educators, mentors, and parents should teach our founding stories through action as well as lectures and then watch the impact on students of this "academics in action" extend well beyond remembering dates.

Finally we need to make holidays that honor our nation's history-like Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, and Flag Day-a time to celebrate the many ways young people display the "Spirit of '76" throughout the year. This challenge particularly engages us because President Bush named us Co-Chairs of the President's Council on Service and Civic Participation with a charge to honor service by Americans of all ages.

All of us should build upon current recognition opportunities available for young people, such as the President's Student Service Award. What better time to honor contemporary service than when we celebrate the service that created our country and demonstrated the promise of democracy to the world.

The "Spirit of '76" is as vital to our future as it has been to our past. We must make sure that every young person understands the ethic of civic action at the center of our national birth.

For more information, contact the National Service-Learning Partnership (www.service-learningpartnership.org) or the USA Freedom Corps (www.usafreedomcorps.gov).

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