

The Sleeping Giant of School Reform

Learning through service is an idea that is bubbling up, rather than trickling down, Messrs. Nathan and Kielsmeier point out. It creates new roles for students and teachers, makes use of action-based instructional methods, and leads to the learning of meaningful, real-world content.

BY JOE NATHAN AND JIM KIELSMEIER

BRISK WINDS blowing across the American political landscape are now converging behind national proposals for youth service, and their force has stirred a sleeping giant in the school reform movement. Combining classroom work with service/social action projects can help produce dramatic improvements in student attitudes, motivation, and achievement. Moreover, this strategy is not a "one size fits all" change imposed from above but builds on local circumstances and teacher insights.

Before going any further, let's get specific. Barbara Lewis is a Salt Lake City teacher whose fourth- through sixth-grade students have been

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Illustration by Bruce Deun, Dean Johnson Design

responsible for the cleanup of a hazardous waste site, the passage of two new environmental laws, the planting of hundreds of trees, and the completion of a number of other neighborhood improvements. The families of the students in Lewis' school have the lowest per-capita income in Salt Lake City, and the students themselves aren't unusually gifted or articulate. However, according to Lewis, "One thing they do have is courage. They don't give up easily. They believe that the future depends on them. They're not afraid to attack things that other people say can't be done."¹ And Lewis' students are not alone.

and then created a new playground. They had to make 20 phone calls before finding someone who would donate six truckloads of sand. The arrival of that sand was a big event in the students' lives.

The youngsters at this inner-city school learned important skills in research, thinking, writing, public speaking, and problem solving — the very outcomes that many school critics demand. The students also learned that they could make a difference.

As one youngster noted after his picture appeared in a local newspaper story about the consumer action class, "I often thought I might have my name in the

I felt needed for a while." Boyer then commented, "There's something unhealthy about a youth culture where feeling needed is pushing Big Macs at McDonald's."⁴

Young people used to assume increased levels of responsibility gradually as they grew into adulthood. Over time, however, the classic agrarian models of apprenticeship with and mentoring by adults have given way to the isolation of young people in youth-only educational, social, and employment groupings.

Young people have become a distinct subculture that is unique in modern history, and their adjustment to this phenomenon has been uneven. In a University of Minnesota poll conducted in 1985, 66% of the young Minnesotans polled said they believed that adults have a negative view of youths.⁵

Though they may be in high demand for entry-level employment at fast-food restaurants and all-night gas stations, many young people are alienated from the society. They are heavy users of drugs and alcohol, they consistently maintain the lowest voting rates of any age group, and the teen pregnancy rate has been described as epidemic.

We believe that these problems stem in part from the way adults treat young people. Unlike earlier generations, which viewed young people as active, productive, and needed members of the household and community, adults today tend to treat them as objects, as problems, or as the recipients (not the deliverers) of services. Young people are treated as objects when they are routinely classified as a separate group, isolated in age-based institutions, and beset on all sides by advertising — though not otherwise recognized or treated with respect. They are treated as problems when they are feared, criticized, and made the focus of preventive and remedial programs. They are treated as recipients of services when they are viewed as creatures to be pitied, "fixed," and "controlled."

We need to change our views of the young. We need to see youths as citizens: as resources and producers who are valued, needed, respected, and acknowledged. Ken Nelson, a Minnesota state representative and a strong advocate of learning from service, believes that much of the concern in this country about youths "at risk" should be refocused on "youth potential, youth strengths, youth

YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE BECOME A DISTINCT SUBCULTURE THAT IS UNIQUE IN MODERN HISTORY.

- Students at Bronx Regional High School in the South Bronx are working with a local community organization to restore a building near their school that will then provide housing for homeless people, including some of the students' own families.

- Middle schoolers in Chicopee, Massachusetts, saved their town \$119,500 while helping to solve a sewage problem.

- High school students in Brooks County, Georgia, conducted a needs assessment of their county and determined that day care was a major need. The students and their teacher established a day-care center that is still operating today — 10 years after its founding.²

One of us taught a class in an inner-city public school in which 14- to 18-year-old students learned about consumers' rights and responsibilities. The youngsters read a variety of materials and listened to outside speakers. In addition, they worked on real consumer problems referred to them by adults. Over the course of several years, the students successfully resolved more than 75% of the 350 cases adults had turned over to them.

A group of 5- to 9-year-old students at the same school designed, obtained permission to build, gathered materials for,

newspaper. I even thought I might have my picture in the paper. But I never thought that it would be for something good."³

The idea that students can learn from community action and from performing a variety of services is not new, as Dan Conrad and Diane Hedin make clear later in this special section on youth service. But in the wake of largely unsuccessful reform proposals and daunting new societal challenges, the political/educational climate has become more open to the kinds of school change demanded by learning that derives from service and social action. We now have the opportunity to expand and improve service/social action projects, to help many more youngsters learn important skills, and to help them realize that they have the power to make changes.

Much recent discussion of school reform has focused on rules, regulations, and decision-making processes. While these are important matters, we think it is also critical to change the way we view young people.

Ernest Boyer recalls a young person's description of his summer job: "Last summer I got a job working at McDonald's. It didn't pay too well, but at least

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participation, and contributions.”⁶ The Children’s Defense Fund agrees, noting that “the experience gained through service can make a lasting difference, giving young people a sense of purpose and a reason to remain in school, strive to learn, and avoid too-early pregnancy.”⁷

Both of us have worked with angry, alienated, and violent students. We readily acknowledge that no single curriculum or strategy will solve every problem, transform every student, regenerate every school. However, each of us has experienced and heard about situations in which acting on a new view of students produced dramatic improvements.

When teachers integrate service and social action into their academic programs, students learn to communicate, to solve problems, to think critically, and to exercise other higher-order skills. They learn these things because they are deeply immersed in a consequential activity — not a metaphor, not a simulation, not a vicarious experience mediated by print, sound, or machine. A task force of the Minnesota State Department of Education explained that service-learning occurs when youths, “involved in planning and providing,” render “significant and valuable service to meet genuine needs in their community.”⁸

The point merits emphasis: learning is furthered when students play an active role in selecting and developing their own service projects. For example, students who attend Gig Harbor High School in

Washington State make decisions about how their newly acquired science, social studies, and English skills will be applied in addressing environmental issues in and around Puget Sound. And the students can feel the importance of their new role. Later in this special section, Kate McPherson quotes Roland MacNichol, a teacher at Gig Harbor High, who explains: “For the first time, students become central and valued.” Also in this special section, John Briscoe, the director of Pennsylvania’s PennSERVE program, describes this shift in our perspective on youth as “profound.”

In the best youth service programs, students have a chance to reflect as well as to serve. Their reflections often lead to new attitudes toward school and academics. Seventeen-year-old Quinn Hammond of Waseca, Minnesota, describes the impact of his tutoring third- and fourth-graders: “The little kids look up to you so much. This taught me to have a lot more patience and gave me a real good feeling. Before, I was kind of a class clown. Volunteering gave me a lot of respect for teachers.”⁹

THE MOST effective service/social action projects are developed at the local school site, rather than in the district office or in the state education department. This means that real authority to design programs must be vested in the school and its staff. It’s no mystery that the teachers most involved in service projects are those who feel personally responsible and empowered to tackle important issues. And teachers derive enormous satisfaction from seeing youngsters become more motivated and eager. As Waseca teacher Don Zwach comments, “This is the most enthusiastic class I’ve had in 30 years. You hear a lot about the problems of motivating students in the 1990s. But there’s absolutely no problem motivating these young people.”¹⁰

The most effective service/social action programs are integrated into a school’s curriculum. The entire range of courses — math, English, social studies, home economics, science, art, physical education, and so on — can be modified to include some form of service or social action. Handled correctly, these changes enable youngsters to apply classroom les-

sons to the world beyond the classroom and so make it much more likely that teachers’ academic goals for their students will be attained. For example, Eliot Wigginton, founder of the Foxfire project, reports that students become much better writers as they help produce a magazine (originally intended just for a few people in Rabun Gap, Georgia, but now read throughout the world).¹¹

A vast array of service/social action learning programs now operate in the nation’s schools. However, research and experience lead us to conclude that the most effective programs include certain key elements. The following features of successful programs are drawn from criteria used for the Governor’s Youth Service Recognition Program in Minnesota:

- significant, necessary, and measurable service is accomplished;
- youths are directly involved in planning and implementation;
- clear institutional commitment to the service program is reflected in goals or mission statements;
- community support for and involvement in the program are strong;
- learner outcomes for the program are well-articulated;
- a well-designed and articulated curriculum for service exists that includes preparation, supervision, and active reflection on the experience; and
- regular and significant recognition of the youths and adults who participate takes place.¹²

COMBINING classroom work with service and social action means learning by doing and giving. And it’s the *giving* that answers the “why” questions students so often raise about school. Students and teachers trained to address issues of environmental quality in Puget Sound have a clear purpose for learning principles and skills in science, sociology, and English. Students in St. Paul who solved consumer problems learned the importance of carefully reading and understanding in advance any paper they are asked to sign; they also learned to value clear writing. Students in Folsom, Pennsylvania, discovered the importance of basic principles of physics as they helped families weigh different options for making their homes more energy efficient. Philadel-

phia high school students who tutor their peers or teach a health lesson in a junior high school see a clear application for their knowledge and a larger purpose for schooling.

We reject the often-stated assertion that *the* fundamental task of school is to prepare students for the work force. In a democratic society, one of the basic purposes of public schools is to prepare students for active, informed citizenship. Part of being a responsible citizen is knowing how to get and keep a job, but an equally important part of citizenship is working to build a better world. Moreover, a thoughtful citizen will sometimes question what's happening in the workplace. For example, one's employer might be discriminating against certain people or polluting the air or ignoring basic safety principles. Today, more than ever, schools must help youngsters develop the skills and attitudes needed to work for justice — not just the skills needed to pass an examination or to work on a high-tech assembly line.

Unlike most school reform initiatives, the new interest in learning through service is arriving on the scene without the impetus of top-down pronouncements from high-level committees. While the National and Community Service Act of 1990 and parts of the national goals for

education do endorse and provide incentives for youth service, the growing acceptance of this idea is largely a product of successful efforts by small national and state-level organizations that provide networking, materials, and technical assistance to interested educators.

Teacher creativity is central to this effort. Teachers dreamed up and developed the environmental service programs at Philadelphia's Lincoln High School. Teachers in Springfield, Massachusetts, initiated programs that provide services to the elderly — not by replicating someone else's model, but by responding to local needs and interests. Teachers in Ortonville, Minnesota, didn't follow a statewide curriculum when they showed students how to use computers to help their parents run more efficient farms.

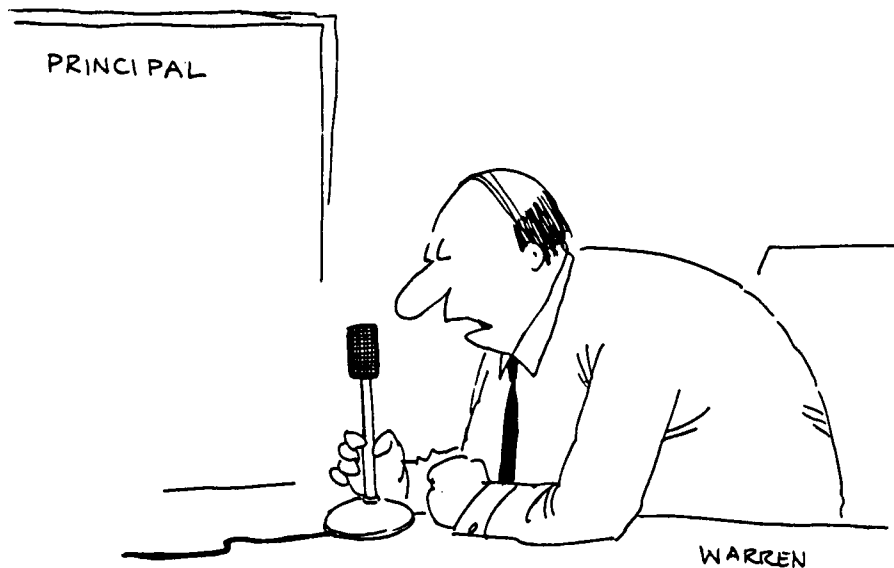
Learning through service is an idea that is bubbling up, rather than trickling down. Fueled by a fresh infusion of energy during the 1980s, it rekindles an idea brought to life by John Dewey in the 1930s: that schools should be democratic laboratories of learning, closely linked to community needs. These learning labs create new roles for students and teachers, make use of action-based instructional methods, and lead to the learning of meaningful, real-world content.

Salt Lake City teacher Barbara Lewis

points out that "the real world is chock-full of real problems to solve: real letters to write, real laws waiting to be made, real surveys to analyze, real streams needing monitoring, scraggly landscapes in need of attention." Writing with youngsters as her audience, she concludes:

Solving social problems will bring excitement and suspense into your life. Instead of reading textbooks and memorizing what other people have done, you'll create your own history with the actions you take. And here's a promise: As you reach out to solve problems in your community, you will not only design a better future. You'll also learn to take charge of your personal life. You'll become more confident in yourself because you'll prove to yourself that you can do almost anything.¹³

What wonderful gifts to pass on to young people. What wonderful gifts to our communities, our country, and our world.



"This is the last day of school. All teachers are to refrain from exchanging high fives or otherwise taunting the students."

1. Barbara Lewis, *The Kids' Guide to Social Action* (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1991) p. 11.
2. For information on school-based economic development programs, contact Paul DeLargy, Georgia REAL Enterprises, P.O. Box 1643, Athens, GA 30603. DeLargy has worked closely with Jonathan Sher, who originally developed this concept.
3. Joe Nathan, *Free to Teach: Achieving Equity and Excellence in Schools* (New York: Pilgrim Press 1991), p. 38.
4. Ernest Boyer, "Foreword," in Charles H. Harrison, *Student Service: The New Carnegie University* (Princeton, N.J.: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1987), p. vii.
5. Diane Hedin, *Minnesota Youth Poll* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Agricultural Station 1985).
6. Ken Nelson, "Minnesota's Youth Development Initiative: Building on Strengths," *Community Education Journal*, October 1988, p. 5.
7. Children's Defense Fund, *Service Opportunities for Youths* (Washington, D.C.: Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Clearinghouse of CDF, May 1989), p. 3.
8. *Model Learner Outcomes for Service Learning* (St. Paul: Minnesota Department of Education, September 1990).
9. Joe Nathan, "Youth Service Class Helps Kid and Community," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 26 November 1990, p. 5-C.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Eliot Wigginton, *Sometimes a Shining Moment. Twenty Years at Foxfire* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985).
12. Jim Kielsmeier and Rich Cairn, "Minnesota Governor's Youth Service Recognition," program guidelines, May 1988.
13. Lewis, p. 2.