

The Risks and Potential of Required Community Service

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Q. We are facing a proposal to require community service for all high school students. I am very concerned about the mixed message this will send to our students about freely giving of themselves in service to others. What are your thoughts on community service as a requirement for graduation?

A. I roll my eyes a bit when those up above reach for coercion to improve those down below: We'll just mandate community service (or character education, or tougher graduation requirements, or whatever) and watch students improve. But while a service requirement hardly guarantees any benefits – which are contingent, among other things, on the extent to which your staff and the students themselves take the activities seriously – neither does it preclude such benefits. Much depends on how (and by whom) the activities are designed.

First of all, I have some concerns about bland activities undertaken by individual students. If, however, you were to redefine “community service” as an opportunity for collective action, genuine democratic involvement, and work for social justice – that would be as exciting as it is rare. (See

Joseph Kahne & Joel Westheimer's article "Teaching Democracy: What Schools Need to Do" in the September 2003 issue of Phi Delta Kappan, as well as other writings by both of these authors.)

Second, for anything of value to come out of this, students need to be involved at all points – in thinking about the rationale for doing some sort of service and in working together to plan every detail of the activities: deciding democratically how many options will be available to each student and discussing the rationale for each option, making contact with people in the community to set things up, making arrangements to evaluate the activities themselves as well as the students' experiences afterwards, and so on.

The process probably ought to be framed as "How can we make our town/ our state / our country /the world a better place? What needs doing? Who requires our care and our help?" – rather than "How can we fulfill this requirement?" Sandwiching the activity itself between planning (before) and reflection (after) – and having the students play a key role in every stage (rather than just giving a menu of options to each student individually) – could turn out to be as valuable, both intellectually and socially, as the activities themselves.

Finally, what one doesn't do can be as important as what one does. I hope it goes without saying that any benefit potentially derived from this activity would likely be wiped out by (1) rewarding students for their participation or (2) setting up some sort of competition between students (individuals or groups).

Some mandates are inherently useless, if not counterproductive, and should be actively resisted. (See under: NCLB.) But my hunch is that this lemon can be made into lemonade. For school administrators to treat students the same way the administrators are treated by policymakers

would instead be to turn salmon into salmonella.

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