

70. Drop-outs Look to Service With a Smile

March 17, 1989

Youth service has become big news in the United States. Not since John Kennedy's Peace Corps, has this country focused so enthusiastically on the idea of involving young people in helping others.

A consensus has emerged that American youth are ready to be inspired by a larger vision, and that the 60 million students in schools and colleges offer a powerful, yet largely untapped, resource for national renewal.

Even Congress has joined the crusade. At least six major legislative proposals have been introduced in the current session, and prospects for some form of federally-supported youth service appear bright.

One piece of legislation, called the "Citizenship and National Service Act," would require young people to perform community or military service in order to qualify for a federal grant to help pay college costs. This proposal has stirred great debate among university officials who argue that it could limit access to higher education and discriminate against the poor.

In this plan, young people who need government help would have to serve, while wealthy students could go directly to college, without serving. Further, all students who serve would receive the same financial assistance, regardless of need. In contrast, the existing federal aid program is based on need, and the wealthiest get no help.

Another program now in the Congressional hopper would award a \$3,000 voucher for every year of service. The vouchers could be used to cover college costs or even as the down payment on a house.

President George Bush has given his backing to voluntary service through a project called the Youth Entering Service to America Foundation. This proposed foundation, with modest federal funding, is designed to stimulate service programs across the nation.

The proposal likely to command the most support among school and college leaders is Senator Edward Kennedy's "Serve America" Bill. At a recent press conference announcing the legislation, the Senator rekindled memories of the inspiring call for national service in his brother's inaugural address.

"I am proposing legislation today to renew President Kennedy's challenge for our own day and generation," the Senator said. "We do not have to compel young Americans to serve their country. All we have to do is ask - and provide the opportunity."

"Serve America" links community service directly to education. The proposed Bill would award grants to schools, colleges, and other agencies to encourage students to serve as tutors and also work in hospitals, homeless shelters, senior citizen centers and the like.

Youth service is an idea whose time has come. However, most US educators want it to be viewed - not as a mandate - but as an educational opportunity that cannot be obtained in any other way. Service can counter the notion that education is irrelevant to life. It can challenge the assumption that young people have little to contribute. Service introduces students to new people and new ideas and helps them become engaged adults.

Catherine Milton who has promoted volunteer programs at Stanford University puts it this way: "When you're worried about whether you're going to get an A or a B on an exam, it does something to you to be working with a disabled child who's struggling to learn to read." The problem is, however, that young people in the United States today can finish high school, and even college, and never be asked to participate responsibly in life, never be encouraged to spend time with older people or help a child learn to read.

Students can complete their formal education having failed to see a connection between what they learn and how they live.

Several years ago, in a Carnegie Foundation report, we proposed that all high school students complete a service requirement to build a sense of common purpose and begin to understand that to be truly human, one must serve. In a follow-up report, we urged that colleges also include service in the undergraduate experience.

A growing number of young people in this country are, in fact, beginning to reach out to others. A recent Carnegie survey revealed that 52 percent of the nation's high schools offer community service opportunities, and about one-half of the college students in the US participate in some form of volunteer service.

Fordham University in New York City has an active program with several hundred students tutoring children and helping in various projects in the city. Its coordinator compared the effort to the civil rights movement, noting that "it's just not true that students don't care."

The University of Pennsylvania's Mentors Program matches graduate students in science with minority middle school students who also have a science interest. In Texas, under-graduates on 16 campuses serve as teacher aides, tutors, counselors, and coaches for teenagers identified as potential dropouts.

Vanderbilt University in Tennessee offers an "Alternative Spring Break." On this campus, students work with inner-city immigrants, on Sioux Indian reservations, or with Appalachian farmers, instead of heading off to Florida beaches for vacations.

The push to promote youth service is long overdue. But regardless of monetary benefits, the program should be linked to learning. In the end, the goal of education is not only to prepare students for careers, but to enable them to live lives of dignity and purpose; not only to give knowledge to the student, but to channel knowledge to humane ends.