

# Community Service: Mandatory or Voluntary?

Sally Newman - Executive Director  
Janet Wilson - Librarian  
Mary-Jo Cliff - Director  
Mentors in Service to Youth  
Generations Together

The concept of community service as an integral part of youth's education is being discussed by educators, parents, and children across the country. An issue that has engendered strong response and differing positions is whether community service in the form of service-learning for children and youth should be mandatory or voluntary. Service-learning involves academic learning experiences coupled with, and related to, students' community service experience. We present a sample of positions gathered from telephone interviews and excerpts from articles that address the question of voluntary and/or mandatory community service.

Generations Together staff made telephone calls during November 1992 to ask: "In your view, should community service be mandatory or voluntary? Please explain."



**Kathleen Kennedy Townsend - Executive Director, Maryland Student Service Alliance:** "All children should learn the skills of citizenship so that they can make a difference in society. These skills do not come easily or naturally. They are learned as reading, writing, performing a science experiment, or shooting a basketball are learned. The community service experience is a form of active learning that has been encouraged by ethical philosophers from Aristotle to John Dewey. If it becomes voluntary, we will neglect those students who are in greatest need of learning these skills. The community service activity has nothing to do with volunteering: it is fundamental to learning."

**Rich Cairn - National Youth Leadership Council - Policy and Publications Director:** "Service-learning should be integrated throughout America's K-12 curricula both for the benefits

to students and to society. State graduation requirements for so many hours of service sell young people short by putting the burden on students rather than on the schools to make opportunities for service and learning available. If a school mandates, but does not provide adequate training, supervision, and opportunities for reflection, it risks hurt to students and the community. Yet if these things are in place, mandates become unnecessary. Young people need only to be asked and they respond eagerly."

**Barbara Moralis - A library worker and parent of a high school student from Bethlehem, PA, Area School District whose school board has adopted mandatory community service:** "Community service must be voluntary by students, excluding requirements imposed by the courts. Students' high school diplomas cannot be held hostage, prohibiting them from graduating. I am not against voluntary service, but it must be a personal choice."

**Phyllis Walsh - Coordinator - Bethlehem, PA, Community Service Program:** "I would like to be in a society or a generation in which community service is truly a "from the heart" venture. Accepting the realities of the 90s, I think that it is not the kind of society we have. It is my belief that we need to make community service an integral part of each student's life and the only logical way to do this is through the school system where we touch every child's life to some degree. I would like to see service-learning as a required part of every school curriculum. Through service learning, students get involved, make decisions, explore jobs and careers, and see other aspects of life."

In the School Youth Service Network publication **Community Service** debate "Mandatory vs Voluntary", students also expressed diverse opinions:

**John Durrenberger - Liberty High School, Bethlehem, PA:** "At first I thought mandatory community service was a stupid idea, but now I think its very good. It gives students a push to do something for their communities and helps them decide what they want to do with their lives."

**Matthew Endreyn - 8th grade Mandatory Program in Providence, Rhode Island:** "I think every school should have community service but it shouldn't be mandatory. I would still be doing service if it weren't mandatory because it teaches me responsibility and gives me a real job while teaching me about different people. But a lot of students don't have the time, it doesn't interest them, or they have different priorities after school, such as sports."

**Kimberly Henry - Elective Credit Course, Edgewater, MD:** "Community service has made me a better, more socially aware person. Service is something to look forward to in school. It gives me a chance to directly help others — without mandatory service, however, only select kids learn what the community needs, gain a stronger sense of community awareness, and learn "life skills" through real responsibilities."

**Toina Vinkers - Elective Community Service Class, San Francisco, CA:** "I think it is a bad idea to require students to do something not for pay, especially something like community service. This is something you need to want to do. You need patience for it as you are dealing with people. Not everyone is comfortable dealing with people."

**Kimberly Patillo - Participant in Extra-Curricula Youth Community Service Program, Los Angeles, CA:** "Mandatory service is not really that bad an idea. For twelve years we use taxpayers money and don't give much back. We should offer service and students should recognize this as a priority."