



Required Service for Teens?

No: Volunteering Rests on Choice not Coercion

By Scott G. Bullock

America has a venerable tradition of private charity and volunteering, a spirit that continues to flourish. Volunteering and charitable giving are at all-time highs as more and more people wish to add another dimension to their lives through volunteer work.

Throughout most of our nation's history, there has been a rather strict wall of separation between volunteering and government. Government may encourage charity through tax exemption, but not until recently has government become directly involved in volunteering efforts. The federal government now subsidizes volunteering through the AmeriCorps program, thereby corrupting the volunteering spirit through the allure of tax dollars. But even more disturbing, a growing number of public school districts now require kids to volunteer in order to graduate from high school.



Scott Bullock is an attorney at the Institute for Justice, 202-955-1300. The Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit group has challenged mandatory community service.

Typically, the programs work like this. School officials pick a certain number of hours—30, 50, 75, perhaps even as high as 200—and tell students that they must now accumulate this number of service hours or they will not graduate, period. Schools normally keep an “approved” list of organizations from which students can choose nonprofit groups. However, if a student wants to work for a group not on the approved list, he or she must petition a teacher or committee of people for approval of the student's selection. Students must fill out time sheets, forms and complete reports. Call it the bureaucratization of volunteering.

Public school officials and individuals in the philanthropic community should reject the notion that public schools can force young people to volunteer. Oxymoronic mandatory community service programs are unwise, unnecessary and possibly even unconstitutional.

A sure way to destroy the volunteering spirit is to use coercion. A “volunteer or else!” philosophy in the public schools will turn kids off on volunteering, especially after they complete the requisite number of service hours. As Mark Sobus concluded recently in *Law & Psychology Review*, a “policy that

threatens a student's diploma as motivation to serve the community is unlikely to foster long-term pro-social attitudes. In fact, a coercive policy should be expected to undermine positive attributions, stifle feelings of self-determination, and ultimately makes self-generated acts of community service more scarce.”

Mandatory service programs are also unnecessary. Volunteering is flourishing in the private sphere of society. Families, churches and nonprofit groups are inspiring young people and adults to volunteer at unprecedented rates. Involving public schools—the government—in this area can only detract from the great work accomplished by these groups. Moreover, mandatory service programs distract public schools from their primary mission of teaching kids academic essentials. When so many of our public schools are failing to teach kids the basics, why would we wish to burden them with tasks they are not particularly suited to accomplishing, such as instilling in young people charitable impulses?

Also, mandatory service invites public schools into legal dilemmas. Parents and students have challenged public school authority in this area, arguing that the decision to serve must be left up to an individual's

(Continued on page 6)

Yes: It's a Way to Teach Community Responsibility

By Suzanne Goldsmith-Hirsch

When the Chapel Hill school district's service learning committee ruled that student Aric Herndon could not receive credit toward his high school's community service requirement for the volunteer work he did as a Boy Scout, opponents of the requirement were quick to cry foul.

And the committee soon realized the opponents were right. The fact that Herndon was "compensated" with a merit badge did not mean that the volunteer work he did—building benches for a public park—was not community service. The committee reversed its decision. But Herndon never applied for credit; nor did the Institute for Justice, the libertarian group that had taken up Herndon's cause, drop its lawsuit against the school. They were more interested in generating controversy than in the facts of the case.

Similarly, today's broader debate over school service requirements bears little relation to what is actually going on in public schools.

A 1995 survey found that one quarter of the students in the nation's 130 largest school districts were subject to some kind of service requirement. The number is surely higher today. The argument most commonly made against these requirements is that they violate the Constitutional prohibition on slavery, or involuntary servitude. Such a comparison, although silly, even offensive, might have some relevance if schools were simply assigning students to public works projects without regard to learning and educational goals.

But in most places, that's not what is happening. In the past

decade, educators have learned much about the educational merits of community service. From their discoveries has emerged a highly effective teaching methodology called "service learning."

Service learning goes beyond simple community service by asking students to select, plan and prepare for their placements and to discuss and reflect on them afterward in order to extract lessons—and sometimes further questions. Service learning thus addresses multiple educational goals, including workplace preparation and civic education.

By placing students in real-world settings, service learning offers powerful lessons in accountability. It gives them a chance to explore career options. And in the process, students learn teamwork, communication and problem-solving skills that the Department of Labor has called key to successful employment in the year 2000.

Furthermore, researchers have found that young people who participate in service while in school are more likely to become voters, to cultivate friendships across racial and ethnic lines, and

to continue to serve later in life—qualities that are much needed as we seek to improve community life in America.

Service learning has gained wide popularity, and has changed the way most schools go about requiring service. Most schools that require service now embed that service in a course or courses—often, civics or citizenship classes.

Better yet, service is often linked to a wide range of academic courses, with science classes engaged in environmental testing and cleanup, students in foreign language classes translating forms and documents for recent immigrants, and students in psychology classes tutoring children with developmental disabilities. Researchers have found that when young people make a contribution to their community, the feelings of concern, caring, engagement and pride that they experience are not only critical to character development, they actively reinforce cognitive learning.

In most school districts that require service, it is explicitly geared to learning goals and is integrated into the academic curriculum. In short, it is an educational requirement, not a work requirement, as opponents claim.

Courts have uniformly agreed: Every court to examine the legal arguments against service requirements to date has upheld their constitutionality.

But why require service, you may ask? By definition, a voluntary program reaches only those students who are already open to the lessons it teaches. Those who need it most are likely to be left



Suzanne Goldsmith-Hirsch is the editor and publisher of Dig: People Growing Strong Communities, an independent, quarterly newsletter

about service, volunteering and community-building efforts. For subscription information, call 219-246-9103, send an e-mail to suzgold@aol.com, or write to Dig, P.O. Box 325, South Bend, IN 46624-0325.

out. If math were not required in school, many of the students whose math skills were the most deficient would be those least likely to sign up. The same is just as true for service: The students most likely to voluntarily enroll in courses that include a service assignment are those who have already internalized the lessons service offers.

At root, the legal and ideological arguments against required service learning attack the notion that the community can require anything of the individual. The mindset that rejects these requirements is the same mindset that rejects jury duty, wartime military service—indeed, any duty to country or community.

Opponents hope to show that service requirements are not needed. Ironically, they demonstrate instead how much they really are. ■

No: Volunteering Rests On Choice not Coercion

(Continued from page 4)
conscience, not government coercion.

So far, courts have upheld the power of public school to require kids to do community service, but constitutional and other legal questions remain. Should public schools give credit for church service? How about to unpopular political causes like radical animal rights groups, the Ku Klux Klan or ACT-UP?

Some people may sincerely believe that these groups are community service organizations, but do we really want our public schools giving credit for this? Moreover, who is liable for injuries sustained by children while performing community service work?

Public school officials can avoid these headaches simply by giving special recognition, perhaps even extra credit, to student volunteers.

Volunteering can be a wonderful part of a young person's life. But there is a world of difference between volunteering based on individual choice and mandatory volunteering. Mandatory community service should be left to criminals, not high school students.

If adults are really interested in getting kids to volunteer, we should use the best tools at our disposal: inspiration, persuasion, and leading through example. The use of coercion not only backfires, it violates the very principle of voluntarism upon which this country is based. ■

Celebrate National Volunteer Week 1998! *April 19-25*

Does the idea of National Volunteer Week seem daunting with all the activities you want to plan? Are you unsure how to reach the media and your community in promoting this important recognition and recruitment week?

The Points of Light Institute can help you plan your National Volunteer Week with the 1998 Promotional Kit. This kit has everything you need including

- press releases, op-eds and speeches
- print and radio ads
- trends and statistics
- sample proclamation to use with your mayor
- quotes about volunteerism and the spirit of giving
- project ideas and motivating stories
- and much more!



You will also receive the camera-ready art for this year's logo "Volunteer! Get Connected!" as well as a disk with all the materials so that you can more easily adapt them to your needs.

This information-packed kit is priced to meet your budget at only **\$16.95**.
Call **800-272-8306** now to order your 1998 National Volunteer Week Promotional Kit.