

RECEIVED MAR 28 1990

The Youth Service Movement: The Trojan Horse of School Reform

A society defines itself by those crises it best engages. Pre-eminent among our national dilemmas is the education of our youth. Those most concerned with the youth of this country have focused on two separate issues. The first is the new Youth Service movement, which has, as its foundation, community service programs, and the second is the renewed interest in educational reform, whose advocates have focused on equal learning for every child, in the context of school systems that seem currently to be best geared to provide for the upper half of this country's children. On the surface, these seem to be completely disparate and unrelated issues. Nevertheless, there are a growing number of civic, educational and governmental leaders who find in both the ingredients of a growing hope for reform in the next century. Among them are David Hornbech, James Kielsmeier, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, John Briscoe, Cynthia Parsons and Kate McPherson, all of whom recognize that inherent within the two movements are the elements of successful learning experiences for children, as well as needed opportunities for strengthening community and national values which support and nourish democratic institutions.

Youth Service is nothing new in America. Its traditions are to be found in the 1930s Civilian Conservation Corps of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the 1960s Peace Corps of John F. Kennedy. Rooted in the ideas engendered from slogans like "habits of the heart" and "ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country", Youth Service programs have refocused their attention for the 1990s on community service initiatives. Spurred on by the environmental and

social needs of the country that seem to be too diverse and profound for governmental solutions, this new direction is central to those who are thinking about a true renewal of democratic values in America. Indeed, this greater commitment to service generates from a realization that government alone cannot begin to define or solve the problems in the local community. This has led President George Bush and national leaders to call for a new emphasis on community service. Legislation will follow by the end of this year.

Educational leaders have come to value community service from another vantage point-- school restructuring. Faced with the growing criticisms from business leaders and governmental officials that the schools are failing, educators increasingly have directed their concerns to school-based management, and to developing ways to engage the learner in more active, real and meaningful learning activities at the classroom level. This has led to many innovative programs throughout the country which emphasize school-based community service programs. These educators take on a community problem and, by fitting it into a school club or credit course, use the energy and enthusiasm of their students to aid in solving the problem. A number of schools already have had great impact on issues such as community environmental problems, literacy problems, intergenerational concerns, help for the homeless, health related problems such as a lack of an ambulance corps in rural areas, and efforts to beautify and clean communities. Such programs offer hope where there was no hope and services where there were no services.

To the surprise of many educators, such community service programs have changed the way teachers view their classrooms and how children learn. This community involvement agenda hits directly at the

idea of reform in education-- namely that useful and meaningful service increases the active participation of the learner, thus motivating the heart and stimulating the mind of the student. There is less memorization and book learning and more doing and remembering.

Learning in such an atmosphere is increased by feedback and reflection, the cornerstones of the thinking process. The classroom teacher in such programs moves away from the traditional teacher centered classroom model to the more effective student centered model. Student journals, readings, and curricula that integrate community service into activity-based lessons become vital to the teacher and learner. Understanding complicated feelings and emotions, and increasingly open discussions, result in students who work with people and communities. Also, students must apply subject matter intrinsic to the project. Learning to learn becomes the issue, not cold subject matter knowledge. Teachers must be retrained to be facilitators of subject-knowledge, discussion leaders, stimulators of worthwhile public projects, and masters of demonstration. Finally, school-based community service programs become translators of how information and knowledge can be used in real-life situations, not just importers of information.

This is clearly the merging point of Youth Service programs and school reform. School-based community service is more than just a way to inculcate neglected human and democratic values, but the Trojan horse which has within it a means for viably restructuring the classrooms of the nation. It is the vehicle that bears the tools to make education real.

Source: Harry C. Silcox, Principal
Abraham Lincoln High School, Philadelphia

1990