

5-2000

Free to Choose Service Learning

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Recommended Citation

Garber, Michael P. and Heet, Justin A., "Free to Choose Service Learning" (2000). *Service Learning, General*. Paper 67.
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Free to Choose Service-Learning

Service-learning, by its activist nature, can easily become politicized. Thus, in the view of Mr. Garber and Mr. Heet, it should exist only in schools that are freely chosen by the families of students who attend them.

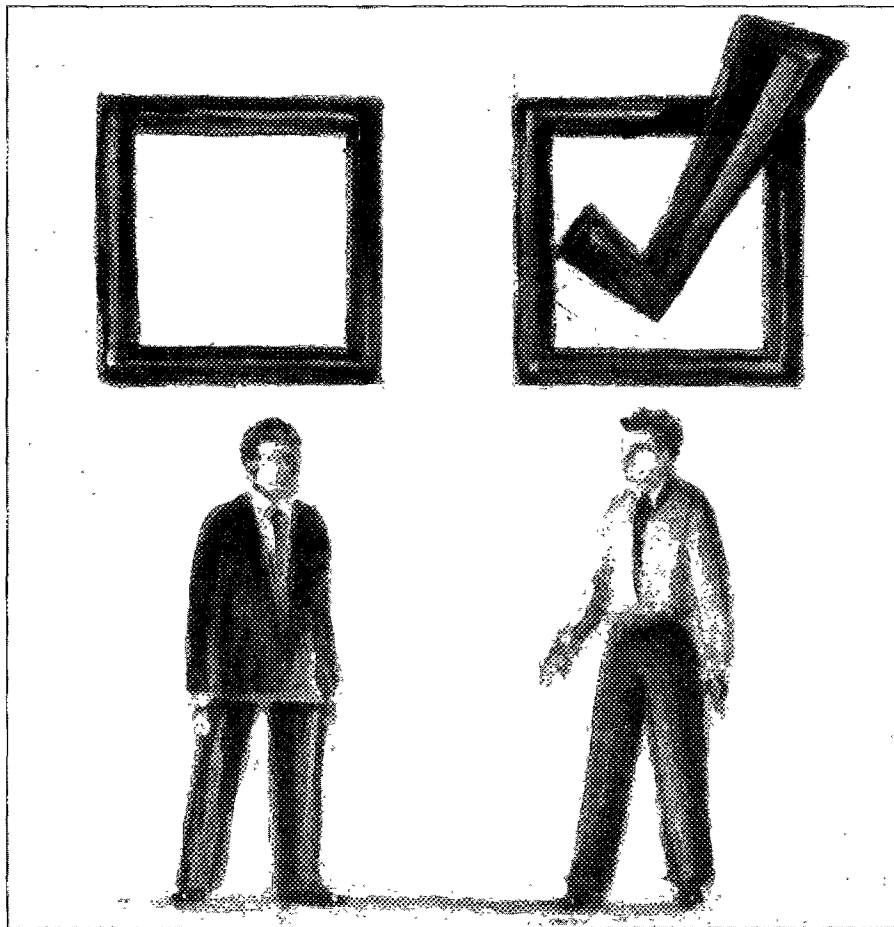
BY MICHAEL P. GARBER AND JUSTIN A. HEET

ONLY DISCIPLES of Ayn Rand could oppose the idea of service-learning. In the best situations, when service is part of a school's program, students are challenged to define themselves through a larger sense of their community and of their responsibility to it. They have the opportunity to apply their skills to problems that require judgment and leadership. Service-learning, if properly understood, can help re-create the functional communities that renowned University of Chicago sociologist James Coleman wrote about as being vital to increasing the amount of "social capital" generated by schools.

The problem is that service-learning, by its activist nature, can easily become politicized. Thus it should exist only in schools that are freely chosen by the families of students who attend them.

As beneficial as service-learning may be, it puts our public schools as they are

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now configured in an untenable position. The opponents of service-learning have often argued that "mandatory volunteerism" is an oxymoron. They're right. But that does not cover the full extent of the problem. In situations in which families are not free to choose the schools their children attend, the introduction of service-learning invariably leads to needless politicization of schools, in many cases weakens schools' ability to serve their primary mission of academic instruction, and attenuates the idea of service-learning itself.

Considerable political conflict already exists within the country's public schools.

At school board meetings across the country, bitter arguments continue over the inclusion of various books in the curriculum, over whether or not evolution should be taught as a science, and even over whether Christopher Columbus was a hero or a villain. When implemented in schools that children are compelled to attend, service-learning adds considerable fuel to these fires.

Critics of the current state of service-learning rightly point out that most of its advocates lean strongly to the left side of the political spectrum. Moreover, most of the programs engaged in by students in the

U.S. reflect a social-activist bent. We believe that it is the responsibility of schools (particularly those funded by taxpayers and run by government entities) to engage students in honest inquiry and an honest effort to understand the many perspectives on a given issue. It is not the role of the schools to engage in advocacy.

This criticism is equally valid from a "progressive" vantage point. What if students in the public schools in Greenville, South Carolina, teamed with Bob Jones University students to hold a protest outside an abortion clinic? Or what if students in Colorado participated in a signature-gathering campaign to put a referendum on the ballot banning special legal protection for homosexuals? What if students chose to volunteer their time at a drug-rehabilitation program run by a church, which required those receiving services to be members of the church and to accept religious instruction in order to get help?

A service-learning program in Maine highlights the slippery slope on which schools can find themselves. Seven freshmen at Sumner Memorial High School in Sullivan, Maine, recently lobbied the state legislature to prevent certain types of fishing in Taunton Bay.¹ The activities all took place with the oversight of the civics and service-learning instructor.

Many people may believe that Taunton Bay requires greater environmental protection. However, if increased regulation requires lobbying, it is clear that not everyone agrees with the idea. Perhaps the parents of students at the school make their living from the kind of fishing their children — or their children's classmates — seek to have banned. The issue is not who is right or wrong about fishing in Taunton Bay. The issue is that, like the communities of which they are a part, schools serve diverse constituencies. Some citizens will inevitably object when their tax dollars are used to advance causes with which they disagree.

It seems to us that schools with mandatory attendance areas (and no choice offered to parents) have two ways of dealing with the prospect of politicization, neither of which is desirable. First, in the tradition of Dewey, schools can welcome the fight. Many proponents feel that schools should support the social engineering that service-learning can engender. Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne go so far as to criticize many service-learning programs

for not being political *enough*. They claim that, in emphasizing personal responsibility or private charity, schools do not do enough to redefine students' conception of citizenship in terms of government action. They lament that few programs "ask students to assess corporate responsibility or the ways government policies improve or harm society. Few programs ask students to examine the history of social movements as levers for change."²

The second response schools might adopt is to attempt to avoid controversy by making service-learning as voluntary as possible. Many schools have already chosen this route. (Indeed, students in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and Chapel Hill, North Carolina, have sued their schools over "forced volunteerism.")³ Rather than ask all students in a class to work on the same project, schools can give students the right to design their own individual or small-group projects, thereby insulating their programs from some of the sting of forced volunteerism. At Harbor City Learning Center in Baltimore, Maryland — a school for at-risk youths that has received widespread attention for its service-learning program — the school's coordinator oversees students who are in "individual service placements."³


The problem with this individual-centered approach is that it diminishes the potential value of service-learning for students. Most service-learning advocates maintain that its promise is not simply the direct community benefit of the students' activities — e.g., cleaner streets, fewer children without toys on Christmas — but the indirect benefit of greater student awareness and

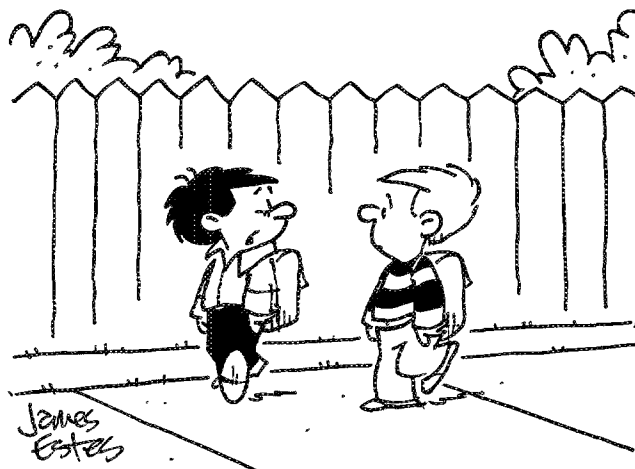
sense of civic responsibility. Even the most optimistic proponents of service-learning acknowledge that these indirect benefits do not happen organically. They come about as a result of reflection, study, and guidance. The lasting lessons grow from working with one's peers to arrive at group solutions rather than from driving toward purely individual solutions. In other words, good service-learning requires what good learning always requires: interaction with other students and the mentoring of an innovative teacher who can help students bridge the gap between good intentions and good results.

Properly understood, service-learning holds tremendous potential for expanding and enriching a child's education. However, problems inevitably result when such programs are implemented in schools that are not freely chosen by the parents of students who attend them. When introduced in these schools, service-learning programs have enormous potential for polarizing, rather than fortifying, the greater school community. The answer is not to dispense with the educationally sound and commonsensical idea of service-learning. The answer is to allow parents to choose schools that are consistent with their priorities and beliefs.

1. Shawn O'Leary, "Students Lobby for Bill to Protect Bay," *Bangor Daily News*, 4 February 2000.

2. Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne, "Service-Learning Required: But What Exactly Do Students Learn?," *Education Week*, 26 January 2000, p. 32.

3. Suzanne Goldsmith, "The Community Is Their Textbook: Maryland's Experiment with Mandatory Service for Schools," *The American Prospect*, Summer 1995, p. 54. 



"My allowance isn't all that much, but I do get free health care."