

SERVICE LEARNING DEPTH

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AS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS GRADUATE THIS MONTH IN ILLINOIS, THOUSANDS OF THEM WILL HAVE WORKED FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS TO MAKE LIFE BETTER IN THEIR TOWNS. INCREASINGLY, THEY HAVE GIVEN OF THEIR TIME NOT JUST FROM ALTRUISM, BUT AS A REQUIREMENT TO GRADUATE. WGLT'S CHARLIE SCHLENKER HAS MORE...

Short, Petite and 17-years old...Brown-Haired Heidi Oettel of Clinton High School in Central Illinois comforts and offers care four hours a week at a nursery and day care for the young sons and daughters of Domestic Violence victims....

Oettel: We play games and we do lots of interacting and talking, it's kind of like a mentor, someone they can talk to and will listen to them...it's a good experience for them to have someone to look up to and they know that someone will always be there and safe for them.

ROB SHUMER, Director of the National Service Learning Center Clearinghouse in Saint Paul, Minnesota says service-learning probably had its origins in a movement called Extension Education back in the 1860s, and has had several other forms throughout the 20th century. The term "service learning" has been traced back to the Southern Regional Education Board in the late 1960s.

The Illinois State Board of Education says in the 1994-95 school year, approximately 8000 Illinois High School students were involved in school-based community service education grants. That has grown five fold to about 50-thousand kids In the school year now ending. The State Board expects the trend to continue.

Indeed, El Paso High School Principal Randy Vincent says he's helped more than 20 other districts in the region who've asked about his district's Learn and Serve program in the last seven years.

About a Decade ago the state of Maryland made service learning mandatory, the only state, so far, to do so. But, increasingly, local districts such as Clinton, El Paso, and the giant Chicago Public Schools **are requiring** service from students.

Clinton High School Senior Heidi Oettel wants to be an elementary school teacher some day. Clinton High School has had a voluntary service learning program for several years. But, this year's graduating class is the first to have mandatory contributions. But, Oettel says she doesn't **feel** coerced...

Oettel: it's real worthwhile, just to see their expressions if they see you out and they come right up and give you a hug, and they just, they see you as a good person in their lives and that's a good thing.

This year as well, a state lawmaker introduced a bill to create a statewide service requirement for graduation. While the bill went nowhere, it is bound to resurface.

Compulsory service troubles Don Hill, the Director of the Service Learning 2000 Center at Stanford University in California. Hill estimates about 70-percent of the people advocating service learning oppose making it mandatory...

Hill says **true** service learning involves deep integration of the service activity and the curriculum....

That kind of circular construct of learning fueling the service and service fueling learning is difficult to set up. Hill says a lot of his colleagues advocate developing small high quality pilot programs and then gradually develop options until every child has a **chance** to take part in service learning.

And El Paso School Superintendent Jim Miller says not every school district will have the resources in school **or** in the community to create a quality service learning program. Even though Miller's District already requires students to do service work, Miller opposes another mandate from Springfield.

Central Illinois learn-and-serve programs have **some** classroom content, usually a unit in American History Class or Social Studies about the effect of community contributions and voluntarism on the nation. That is less than the tight integration of project and classroom that true service learning entails, although Clinton High School is still tinkering with the classroom portion of its learn-and-serve program.

But, local educators say that's not their entire purpose. Clinton's Service Learning Coordinator Chuck Nagel says the United States is built on people pitching in and helping neighbors....

we think that kids will get these type of intrinsic things, that they'll just learn to give of themselves, they'll just somehow through osmosis just learn how to do volunteer work. But, I think we've lost a little bit of that over time. And as educators it's almost our duty to teach them how to do that again

Nagel estimates about 80 percent of the children already offer their contributions to the community in a variety of ways. They **already** have the habit of giving back to their towns. So why **do** a program that is aimed at only 20-percent of the student body?...

we can make the same argument about math and science and english too....if it was only one percent I still believe it's our duty as educators to help them get to that point where they understand how important this is.

ROB SHUMER, Director of the National Service Learning Center Clearinghouse says studies show mandating service may increase kids awareness of the community and the needs of other people. But, it does NOT lead to lifelong pattern changes. Shumer says the **real** message is that once you have your 40 or 75 hours in, you can stop being a good citizen.

18-year old Rebecca Hartke of El Paso rejects that contention. Hartke put in more than 150 hours of service work at grade school basketball camps, in her church, doing road cleanups, and working at an area nursing home...which taught her to respect aging and savor each day of her own...

I heard stories from these people that, you can't have those unless you've experienced them, and to those people, that's all they have now, and that's a beautiful thing for them. They're now stuck in a wheelchair, but, their memories are keeping them going day tothey're happy to be alive, they're happy to be in the place they are

And , El Paso High School Principal Randy Vincent says he has seen kids change course, because of their work tutoring younger at-risk students...

... Vincent...and they found out that they had something to offer and had some success with the person they were tutoring at the grade school level and it made a difference in their view of their own education and actually they made a significant turnaround to there they were one of the more improved students in the building

It's **even** possible, Nagel and Vincent say, that volunteerism will help kids on the fringe stay in the mainstream, kids that might have felt isolated enough to do something as terrible as the shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. At the very least, Nagel says, forcing those kids out in the community makes sure more people know them and their views...increasing the chance to prevent a tragedy. And Nagel says consider the value to the community of Clinton. About 700 High School students contributed nearly 49-hundred hours of help to other people.

18-year old Audrey Ooms of El Paso says people shouldn't be afraid to give of themselves....

*well, some kids see it as a requirement just like another class they have to take to get through graduation. But, I think that as soon as you get involved in something selfless, in some kind of community service, you see that it really isn't something that must be borne, there **is a joy in serving others.***

And while the beginning may seem lame, she says by the end of the service, students can see the impact they made on the community. Ooms says that example is valuable to the entire community, not just to the students involved. But, she says the effort in her work with a church youth group has also come back to her four-fold...

the kids were such a joy to work with. They form attachments and affection so quickly without being judgmental at all. You can make mistakes, you can fumble around in your lesson, and they're still attentive and if they recognize you on the street they'll come up and give you a hug, hey you're my adventure club teacher, that's just so cute

The next challenge, say Chuck Nagel and Randy Vincent say is getting Clinton and El Paso High School parents involved in community service efforts. That will help kids accept the premise and hopefully spur student creativity about their own projects. Nagel, in particular, wants to find a community service activity on which the entire student body could work.