



# The Promise of Service-Learning

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Long before public education became concerned with preparing children to compete in the global economy, it focused on producing good citizens. The Massachusetts Constitution, which predates the U.S. Constitution by a decade, devotes an entire section to promoting better citizenship through education. The framers of this document expected citizens to be well educated in many subjects, as well as committed to promoting both private charity and the public good.

Two reports released in 2006, *America's Civic Health Index* and *The Silent Epidemic*, have highlighted the need to rescue the notion that the ultimate goal of public education includes producing good citizens — not just productive workers. Service-learning is a necessary part of these rescue efforts, as an effective strategy for improving the quality of instruction, motivating students to complete high school, and encouraging them to become active participants in their communities.

## The Growing Civic Divide Between the Well-Educated and Less-Educated

The National Conference on Citizenship, a federally chartered nonprofit organization formed after World War II to strengthen citizenship, created *America's Civic Health Index*, which measures 40 indicators of civic health organized into nine categories. The Index tracks individuals' connections to civic and religious groups, giving and volunteering, social trust, trust in major institutions, and expressions of political views. While

there are some signs of civic recovery in the last few years, our civic health shows steep declines over the last 30 years.

According to the Civic Health Index (National Conference on Citizenship 2006, 10-11), one of the most dramatic divides in civic health is dependent upon levels of education. Individuals with college degrees are 9 to 17 percentage points ahead civically of individuals with no college experience. The divide between college graduates and high school dropouts has been as great as 24 percentage points and was 15 points in 2004. While the civic health gaps between college graduates and people without college experience or high school diplomas shrank from 1975 to 1999 these gaps have widened significantly since then. College graduates are much more likely than their less educated peers to vote, volunteer in their communities, read newspapers, trust one another and key institutions, and participate in a civic group.

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According to the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey data, from 2001 to 2004, college graduates were more than four times as likely to volunteer regularly than high school dropouts (43 percent to 10 percent). In 1975, more than three quarters of college graduates attended club meetings at which they could address common issues, develop relationships, and network. Thirty years later, less than half (47 percent) attended club meetings annually. But the decline was much steeper for people who left high school. In 1975, almost half of adults without high school diplomas attended club meetings. The figure dropped to 15 percent in 2005.

Many Americans have withdrawn from regular "public work" in their communities, but the decline has been most pronounced among people with the least education. In 1975, most college graduates (58 percent) had worked on a community project in the year prior. By 2005, that proportion had been

cut to 35 percent — a 40 percent decline. For those without high school diplomas, the decline was from 32 percent to 15 percent, a drop of almost 55 percent. Today, few high school dropouts participate in community projects — an especially serious problem for the hundreds of communities in which the dropout rate is high.

College graduates dominate everyday community life in the United States; high school dropouts are almost completely missing. Half of the Americans who attend club meetings, and half of those who say they work on community projects are college graduates. Only 3 percent of these active citizens are high-school dropouts. Thirty years ago, the situation was very different. In 1975, only about one in five active participants was a college graduate, while more than one in 10 was a high school dropout.

For the most part, the least educated are no longer part of the Tocquevillian civil society. The composition of civil society has changed in part because college graduates have become more numerous. But, unnoticed in these broader demographic changes, and more alarming, is that the rate of civic participation has fallen more steeply among the least-educated than among the college-educated.

Focusing on increasing high school and college graduation rates would yield a double reward: providing students with the skills necessary for employment, while also building their capacity to participate in community projects.

### The Silent Epidemic of High School Dropouts

In spring 2006, Civic Enterprises, working in association with Hart Research Associates and supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, published *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. In addition to highlighting the fact that each year almost one-third of all public high school students fail to graduate with their class, the report showed that most students could have completed high school given the appropriate support.

Academic failure, while a factor for a minority of students, was not the predominant reason that most students cited for dropping out; boredom and disengagement were the leading causes. Many students who decided to drop out complained that classes were not interesting and failed to connect to their career dreams. Seven out of 10 students reported that they did not see the real-world applications of their schoolwork. Based on

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this data, *The Silent Epidemic* recommends that educators develop curricula that connect what students are learning in the classroom with their real life experiences and the world of work.

Participants in the study recounted that some of their best days in school were when their teachers noticed them and got them involved. The study suggests that personal connections with teachers and school staff help students to stay in school. Unfortunately, a large percentage of students who drop out lack a sense of personal connection with their teachers. While two-thirds (65 percent) of those surveyed said that there had been a staff member or teacher who cared about their success, only 56 percent said they could go to a staff person for school problems and just two-fifths (41 percent) had an educator they felt comfortable talking to about personal problems. The report recommends that schools do more to foster strong adult-student relationships.

The decision to drop out is a dangerous one for the student. Dropouts are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, on death row, unhealthy, divorced, and single parents with children who drop out of high school themselves. Our communities and nation also suffer from the dropout epidemic due to the loss of productive workers and the higher costs associated with increased incarceration, health care and social services. We have known that the dropout epidemic has personal, economic, and social costs. What we now know is that the decision also has severe civic costs to local communities and the nation, and creates a class of young people who are nearly voiceless in a system that is failing them.

### Service-Learning as a Ray of Hope

Service-learning can help keep more students engaged in the classroom by making their schoolwork personally relevant. A woman interviewed for *The Silent Epidemic* reported dropping out two years short of graduation despite entering high school intending not only to graduate but to excel. She said:

*If they related to me more and understand that at that point in time, my life ... what I was going through, where I lived, where I came from. Who knows? That book might have been in my book bag. I might have bought a book bag and done some work.*

Of the interviewees, 81 percent agreed, saying that if schools had provided opportunities for real-world learning — including service-learning — it would have improved the students' chances of graduating from high school.

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Service-learning can also provide young people with an opportunity to be agents of change in their communities. Empowering students and giving them a voice in the larger issues facing their communities can inspire them to become better students in the classroom and engaged citizens in their neighborhoods.

At César Chávez Public Charter Schools for Public Policy in Washington, D.C., high school students engaged in a service-learning project that changed their own lives and the lives of those in their community. The D.C. public libraries were closed, and these students recognized a need for them to reopen. They researched and became experts on conditions that had caused the collapse of the D.C. Public Library system. They also explored factors that contribute to the success of other library systems around the country. These student experts then testified before the D.C. City Council and

generated ideas for the revitalization of the D.C. Public Libraries that were included in the City's final plan.

Irasema Salcido, the school's founder and principal, reports that these students already view themselves as active, engaged citizens who can improve the quality of life in their communities. They are connecting that transformational experience to the lessons they learn in the classroom.

Service-learning has also been shown to promote stronger adult-student relationships, a key to academic, personal, and civic growth. In *Growing to Greatness 2006*, Martin, Neal, Kielsmeier, and Crossley report findings from the Survey of Service-Learning and Transitioning to Adulthood, a nationally representative survey conducted by Harris Interactive in the U.S. They found that students who participated in service-learning projects felt supported by adults who participated with them. Additional analysis by Markow et al. (2006) found that students who had participated in service-learning are nearly twice as likely (54 percent) to report having at least one teacher who they could go to if they were in trouble or needed help, as compared with 28 percent of students who did not participate in either service or

service-learning. This suggests that participation in service-learning might have helped the 59 percent of dropouts interviewed for *The Silent Epidemic* who reported having no adults at school with whom they could discuss personal problems. Participating together in service-learning projects fosters stronger relationships between youths and adults.

More extensive, well-designed service-learning projects hold the promise for keeping more students on track to graduate and for engaging more students in the lives of their communities. The national data, which shows a dropout epidemic and a growing civic divide based on educational achievement, confirms that increasing student access to service-learning is an urgent priority for our nation.

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