

# Meaningful learning for our students

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

“Education constitutes the moral strength and beauty of every state and forms the only sure basis upon which a good society can rest,” wrote Robert Vaux, the founding father of Pennsylvania’s public school system. To this end, he defined the mission of those schools as the “universal diffusion of intelligence” and the “cultivation of good morals” in young people.

Good citizenship and morality have been the ultimate goals of the commonwealth’s schools since they were established by law in 1836. School-based community service programs, more appropriately called “service learning,” have, over the last few decades, been one of the most effective means for accomplishing this mission.

Unfortunately, a recent suit against the Bethlehem, Pa., school board asked whether a 60-hour service learning requirement subjected students to involuntary servitude and unconstitutionally forces them to submit to a government-approved belief in altruism. The suit — and not the requirement — undermines the very spirit of service learning by relegating it to the sphere of consumer politics.

The real issue is not whether service learning should be required or

*Service learning can instill in students an awareness of responsibility to the larger society.*

not, but whether our public schools provide an effective and meaningful education for our young people. A meaningful education nurtures in students a sense of personal accountability, an awareness of responsibility to the larger society and an appreciation for the learning process itself.

All of these qualities suggest an obligation to community as well as to

school reformers understand the need to create a more meaningful education along these lines. That is why they are engaged in a debate over the applicability of an outcomes-based education, a concept that proposes to make the primary focus of education what students know and are able to do. If properly integrated into the curriculum, service learning would be one of the most meaningful solutions to the widespread apathy our students have toward the learning process.

Environmental science, for example, could be taught by adopting a local park, cleaning it up and caring for the wildlife that inhabits it. Oral history projects can form the basis of meaningful relationships between students and the elderly as well as an effective method to learn about U.S. history.

Sharing life experiences with recovering drug addicts would give students an insight into the causes and results of substance abuse, not only teaching the value of respecting one’s health but the importance of “second chances” in life. Similarly, tutoring the illiterate, feeding the homeless and playing with terminally ill children are invaluable ways to empower students by giving them a vested interest in their educations.

But even beyond the educational value of these activities, service-learning teaches students the importance of caring — something that seems to have become a lost art in our society.

Confronted daily with physical violence and insensitivity on the streets and in the media, it is extremely difficult for today’s students to learn how to be caregivers. Many of them cry out for the need to care and to be cared for. Many students who participate in service learning do so to compensate for lost relationships or missed opportunities, either with a parent, a close friend or a sibling.

Divorce, death or drugs have often claimed those closest to them and service learning becomes the most constructive outlet to cope with their hurt. Helping others allows them to help themselves and, for some, restores a sense of self-esteem.

At a time when many of our nation’s schools have compromised the integrity of the learning process for information, amusement and consumerism, it is refreshing to know that the Bethlehem School District has drawn the line with a serious commitment to service learning. Perhaps those who seek to challenge that commitment under the pretense of “defending” the constitutional rights of their children should reconsider the issue. After all, the way we teach our children tells us something of the future we envision. The failure to cultivate responsible, intelligent, and caring citizens — the failure to provide a truly meaningful

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### Commentary

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