

## The Benefits of Service Learning

By Senator John Glenn

Elbert Hubbard, a popular homespun philosopher at the start of the 20th century, had some words of wisdom well worth reconsidering at the start of the 21st century: "A school should not be a preparation for life," Hubbard observed. "It should be life." How right he was. Survey after survey shows the public expects today's students to be well versed not just in reading, math, and science, but also in the citizenship skills they'll need in a complex and increasingly diverse America. And surely in a nation where even a hotly contested presidential election barely draws a 50 percent turnout, it's time for schools to better engage students in our civic life. My high school civics teacher made government come alive for us; that's what inspired my lifelong interest in public service. Today we have an innovative teaching method for making civics lessons real for all students: service-learning.

By its very definition, civic responsibility means taking a healthy role in the life of one's community. That means that classroom lessons should be complemented by work outside the classroom. Service-learning does just that, tying community service to academic lessons. Students apply their classroom lessons in English, government, science, math, economics, and other subjects to very real community problems. They learn while they serve and thus establish a link between the joy of learning and the joy of service that rewards them throughout their lifetime. Service-learning helps students become engaged in the public issues of their community, and fosters respect and tolerance for others. This education method has been drawing rave reviews wherever it is tried, and I'm excited about it too.

A growing body of research shows that meaningful service to the community interwoven with high-quality classroom instruction benefits students in four different areas. It greatly enhances students' academic skills, fosters a lifelong commitment to civic participation, significantly sharpens the so-called "people skills," and, perhaps most importantly for our nation, prepares youth to enter and mesh with what almost surely is the most diversified work force in the history of the world.

Let me give you a few quick examples of outstanding service-learning taking place in our nation's schools:

- At Spring Valley High School in Columbia, SC, more than 1,200 students are engaged in service-learning projects. Spanish-language students, for example, launched a project to benefit the area's fast-growing Hispanic population, distributing more than 20 tons of food, clothing, medicine, and household products to needy new arrivals.
- Students at Crook County High School in Prineville, OR, play a key role in improving their community's health. For example, health-occupation classes conducted a public awareness campaign on the importance of child immunization

that helped raise vaccination levels dramatically. Students recently organized a community health fair that provided free blood pressure checks, updates on health issues facing the community, and an assembly where local hospital officials warned about trauma injuries related to the misuse of alcohol.

High school community-service programs have been popular since the 1980s, and more than two-thirds of our public schools now offer them in one form or another. But only a third integrate them into the classroom to provide a total learning opportunity. That's unfortunate because more than 80 percent of schools with service-learning programs report that most of the participating students improve their grade point averages. A study of a Springfield, MA, high school found the dropout rate plunged from 12 percent to one percent after service-learning was incorporated into the curriculum. The number of students going on to college increased by 22 percent and those achieving a grade point average of 3.0 or higher jumped from 12 percent to 40 percent.

Some critics of service-learning believe that schools step over the line by teaching civic values – that they should stick to the barest of the basics. They fail to understand that service-learning abets classroom learning in a very pragmatic way. There's an old Chinese proverb that goes: "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand."

My own life has been enhanced beyond compare by the things I learned from being of service – first as a Marine Corps aviator, then as an astronaut in the NASA space program, and finally as a United States Senator. Service-learning provides the kind of understanding that today's students will find particularly useful on our small but wonderful planet. Parents, teachers, and policymakers across the country need to make sure it is available to all of our schoolchildren at every level of their education.

*Former Ohio Senator John Glenn is chairman of the National Commission on Service-Learning, a 19-member committee of educational, business, government, and citizen-advocacy leaders that will research and recommend best practices in service learning. The Commission, based in Newton, MA, is a joint project of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation's Learning in Deed initiative and the John Glenn Institute for Public Service and Public Policy at Ohio State University.*