

WARNING – Before going any further it should be noted that although New York is the only state explicitly discussed in this paper, it doesn't *necessarily* mean that it has done something exceptionally commendable and nor does it *necessarily* mean that it has done anything particularly lamentable. The purpose of this paper is to highlight their policy so New York State can serve as a model for other states and schools throughout our nation.

Community Service Encouragement and Implementation within New York School Districts

It seems to be a growing trend in this rapidly changing and advancing society to place a greater emphasis on rapid development. Nowhere is this tendency more visible than our own school districts. Every year the collective knowledge of the human race grows exponentially in leaps and bounds and with this new found knowledge comes a greater responsibility to teach our children and colleagues a greater amount of material. So, as our curriculum expands so does our workload. Consequently, teachers often make the mistake of rushing through a fact-based syllabus, often forgetting some of the most important lessons that can only be taught outside the classroom. These lessons, that I am not so subtly alluding to, are, of course, the values of community service and volunteerism. If this area of “ethical learning” requires kids to be outside of the classroom, is it really the teachers job to teach it? Whose jurisdiction does community service fall under? The federal government? The state government? The local government? Where do parents’ responsibilities end and where does the school’s responsibility begin? How would one even go about encouraging, let alone “teaching”, something as subjective as “ethical integrity” and community service? Incidentally, these questions have managed to contract much controversy and have been a matter of much public debate in recent decades. This is not an issue void of emotion and biases, it is a subject of sentiment and passion that often strikes a philosophical chord in all spectators. The following report chronicles and analyzes New York State and their never-ending endeavor to confront the topic of community service within its school districts.

In order to better understand New York State’s community service policies it is necessary to appreciate its complex educational system. At the top of this behemoth bureaucracy is the New York State Educational Department (NYSED for short) which is appropriated situated in Albany (the state’s capital). NYSED is responsible for all *public schools*—that is to say any school that receives funds from local and/or state taxes—within New York State. NYSED establishes all curriculum guidelines and creates all official regulations, which, needless to say, supersedes any local decisions within any individual school district. Among many other tasks, NYSED is responsible for the creation and administration of standardized tests (commonly known simply as “The Regents”) in all of the core subjects: mathematics, English, history, foreign language, and the natural sciences. If you are not from New York State then chances are you have never even heard of the Regents tests, but rest assured that these standardized tests represent significant percentages of our curriculum. Additionally, these tests are of considerable concern to NYSED which administers them via a subdivision called the Board of Regents. NYSED is headed by an acting counsel; however the person in charge of the daily affairs is the Commissioner of

Education, Carole F. Huxley. There are seven main branches of NYSED, each of which is under the direction and supervision of the Commissioner, that deal with subjects as diverse as educational curriculum, cultural archives, finance and management, and special help for the disabled.

The New York State Education Department breaks the state up into ten different geographical regions called Joint Management Team Regions. Each Joint Management Team Region is in turn comprised of one or more central agencies called Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES for short) which in turn supports several school districts. School districts are made up of several schools within a very specific locality that cover public education from Kindergarten to grammar/elementary school to middle school and high school. If you lost yourself somewhere in this hierarchical pyramidal-structured organization don't worry, that's the point. The important thing is to appreciate the organization for what it is—a bureaucracy—and like all intricate systems it is susceptible to inefficiency and confusion. This understanding will help give you a better appreciation of New York State and its educational policies.

The truth in the matter is that the New York State Education Department is far more concerned with *what isn't allowed* than *what is allowed*. The majority of this vast government bureaucracy is devoted to eliminating potential lawsuits and covering its own legal tracts. Before you get up in arms it is important to understand the specifics of their policy because not all of their restrictions are all that bad.

Perhaps the most infamous limitation created by NYSED pertaining to community service is Regents Rule 19.6. Despite the unbearable formality exuded by this intimidating bureaucratic name, the main premise of this piece of litigation is actually quite simple (although their official explanations might suggest otherwise). The primary design of this restriction is to keep school zones educational, in other words, ensure that the main purpose of an educational facility is to teach and not to raise money for various charitable organizations or non-perishable food items for the needy. Of equal concern to NYSED is preventing student pressure. They want to ensure that no student will feel pressured to participate in fundraising or community service activities. Under this Regents Rule 19.6 it would be, for example, illegal for a New York State teacher to *require* students to donate a certain amount of cans to pass a course since a school zone should theoretically be a non-pressured environment. Certainly few people would dispute the previous ruling; however, it is amazing how fast policies can get ambiguous... What if a student could submit canned donations but this time only for extra credit, is that immoral? Is it unethical to offer community service field trips during school hours? What about after-school hours? As these questions suggest there is a vast gray area, like all things the devil is in the detail.

In order to combat this enormous territory of ambiguity NYSED did what all government bureaucracies do best, add lengthy, confusing clauses that disturb the rule's original simplicity. Unfortunately this mystifying process often transforms a good guideline with just and noble intentions to an overprotective and controlling regulation. With that said, it is good to see that this particular rule didn't get too convoluted like much of its ancestors.

One section of Regents Rule 19.6 prohibits “[t]he direct solicitation of charitable donations from public school students on school property during school hours, i.e., asking school children directly to contribute money or goods for the benefit of charity during the hours in which they are compelled to be on school premises.” Under certain circumstances fundraising is allowed during school hours but “[o]nly where the food, clothing, other goods or funds are collected in a non coercive and passive fashion, such as through a bin or receptacle placed in a hallway or other common area.”

These previous stipulations all appear to have logical justifications, after all who really wants to turn a school zone into walking advertisements for various charitable causes? Although the noble objectives of Regents Rule 19.6 are generally preserved even after numerous additions, it still ends up as a pesky limitation after its interpretation. Some schools have taken it upon itself to interpret the state’s laws which, rather unfortunately, often magnifies the original limitation since local schools have a propensity of erring on the side of caution. Rule 19.6’s restrictions for school sponsored extracurricular activities (after-school) are surprisingly scant. Despite this leniency many local schools within New York State choose to move away from after-school community service since such actions often require field trips which create the problem of transportation. If the school is able to provide its own transportation there is seldom an issue, the real concern arises when individual students are forced to get their own transportation. Requiring students to get their own rides creates several problems: it puts pressure on seniors to drive other students (which incidentally opens up a bunch of other legal issues), it outcasts underprivileged kids from various clubs since many of these students may be incapable of getting a ride, and it pressures students to take up community service lest they lose respect from their fellow club members.

Because of the aforementioned reasons many local schools opt for a more disconnected form of community service via fundraising and donations. This is just one example of an unfortunate policy that develops from an originally noble regulation. In the gifted words of Ralph Wald Emerson “It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself”. In other, more cheesy and plain words, when you help another you are helping yourself. It is, in my opinion, very sad that conscientious students never get to see the fruits of their labor. In one New York State school there was an after school club devoted to knitting blankets for the poor. Although many of these students undoubtedly felt good about their ethical actions, their experience was void of a unique feeling of satisfaction. Making covers and knitting sweaters just simply doesn’t give students the same satisfaction as hand-delivering the goods to the needy. Denying students of this gratification could turn them off to the notion of community service and could thereby ironically lead to a generation increasingly indifferent towards the poor and needy. Where in our nation’s vast history did we migrate towards a disconnected society? Community service isn’t an isolated system; it shouldn’t be some factory process where its workers blindly produce goods with little knowledge of their consumers. Why should students have other people deliver the blankets that they knitted?

NYSED asserts that they grant a great deal of autonomy to local school districts and although there is no state mandate for a community service requirement, they do not prohibit individual schools within the New York area from creating one. It is clear from NYSED’s actions that they prefer to keep

their hands out of the messy affair of “ethical education.” Such subjects are often so subjective that they are sure to get complaints from one side or another. It is, after all, very difficult to determine what type of charities are acceptable and which are not. Even if such issues could be easily decided, schools can still face potential accusations of disproportionately allocating attention to various causes. For these reasons the New York State Education Department leaves much of the actual decision making to the local school districts.

New York State does, however, require a ½ unit of Participation in Government (commonly referred to as PIG for short) or “its equivalent” in order to graduate. Although the PIG syllabus differs from school to school there are some common characteristics. The average PIG curriculum would most likely include the following requirements: writing a research paper analyzing a current government policy, observing or researching a typical government meeting, and writing a letter to a local official. In addition the PIG curriculum often outlines several characteristics of a good citizen. PIG is New York State’s attempt to encourage community service. The following is a statement issued in response to my inquires from an official representative of Governor David Patterson and NYSED pertaining to the PIG requirement:

The Participation In Government Core Curriculum discusses options (pp. 18-19) that local school district officials might explore as they develop their local Participation in Government instructional program. A community-based experiential local option, in which teachers proceed briskly through the content topics to lay a foundation for a community-based experience like service learning is thoroughly explored. However, *the inclusion of service learning into a district’s instructional program is a local district decision.* Many, New York State school districts currently include community service in their locally developed Participation in Government instructional program, but it is not mandated. (Jo Ann Larson)

Indeed, many public schools within New York State have decided to have community service as a requirement for the PIG course. In addition, some schools even require an analytical paper about the service (which has the unfortunate effect of tainting the experience). As with most things, decreeing something is a lot different than actually implementing something. Many schools fail to thoroughly investigate students’ reports and only require an official’s signature to prove that a student actually volunteered. Such scant regulations have led to much speculation over how many students actually volunteer, while some claim forgery and lying to be rampant others believe it to be a rare occurrence. Putting aside the potential incidence of forgery there are still other short-comings of this community service initiative. Local schools that decide to entail community service often require a minimum number of hours (usually in the range of 10-20 hours in the course of several months). In order to complete these requirements as quickly as possible many students cling to simplistic and monotonous tasks such as a job at a soup kitchen. Another issue is, once again, determining whether an organization is an acceptable charity or not. At my school a student needs to formally propose an organization and receive a teacher’s “okay” before proceeding with volunteering. Despite this requirement, students still find ways around it. Some students, for example, try to manipulate the system by proposing to volunteer at a place they already work at i.e. serving as a lifeguard at a local swimming pool. Since the

student is paid for his or her service such actions can hardly be considered “volunteering”, but the teacher doesn’t know that, he/she is blissfully unaware of the student’s manipulation.

Although many of you are more familiar with the adjacent city of Binghamton, the school I actually belong to is Vestal Senior High (although it is not unusual to confuse the two). Vestal Senior High is part of the Vestal Central School District which includes 5 elementary schools, 1 middle school and 1 high school. The Vestal Central School district is a part of the Broome-Tioga BOCES center which is in turn part of the Mid-South Joint Management Team Region in New York State. Due to the proximity of other high schools within the region my high school is often grouped together with Binghamton High School and Union-Endicott—collectively referred to as the “Southern Tier Schools” although this title is largely unofficial. Vestal High School is one of the many schools within New York State that has decided to have a community service requirement for its PIG course.

After interviewing several high school seniors I discovered that peoples’ speculations about the PIG community service requirement are not completely unwarranted. Roughly 20 % of the people I interviewed admitted that they either did not complete the volunteering requirement or that they deceptively masked their job as a community service project in order to obtain the minimal number of hours. Although it is possible that this number is inaccurate (due to peoples’ natural tendency to hide wrong doings), I have no reason to believe this to be the case since all interviews were done in a covert fashion with all identities remaining anonymous.

My high school is unique in the sense that it does not rely solely on PIG to encourage community service. Vestal Senior High is fairly adamant in its support of the needy—a characteristic that is at least partially attributable to the multiplicity of disasters within our area (i.e. the shooting at the Civic Center and the flood a couple years ago). Chances are if you walk into Vestal High School on any given day you will see some form of community service—whether it be a coat-drive for the Salvation Army, a food-drive for CHOW, or a fundraising event for the poor. Such events are often done in the morning before first period or in the afternoon after the last period. All charitable events are spearheaded by school-sponsored clubs. Some of the most active clubs in my school are Interact Club, P.E.A.C.E. Club, Student Government, and Environmental Club. Although each club has its own special agenda it is not unusual for them to team up for a collective cause. Last year, for example, P.E.A.C.E. club partnered with S.A.D.D. (Students Against Destructive Decisions) to run fundraising events in order to donate a couple hundred dollars to hurricane victims.

Despite the best efforts of Vestal Clubs, no amount of donations can compensate for “real” community service. As mentioned earlier there is a big difference between knitting sweaters for the poor and actually *hand-delivering* the sweaters to the poor. Very seldom does Vestal allow clubs to participate in a “more involved form” of community service i.e. cleaning up a river or picking up trash at the public playground. In order to encourage this form of volunteering the school looks toward either PIG or the IB (International Baccalaureate) Diploma. One of the requirements for the IB Program is that participating students volunteer for at least 50 hours and chronicle their experiences in journal. Since this Program is more rigorous and contains more regulations than the comparable community service requirement in PIG, there is little chance of forgery and deception. It should be noted that the IB

Diploma is an *international program* and its success should therefore be only partially attributed to any given school.

Recently I surveyed nearly 100 different seniors in my high school in order to discover how effective Vestal is in encouraging community service (or at least how people perceive its effectiveness). When asked “On a scale of 1 to (with 1 being “a little” and 10 being “a lot”), how effective is your school in encouraging community service”, students gave Vestal, on average, a 3. This value, however, should not be seen in an overly negative light considering students’ naturally tendency to regard their school pessimistically. The overwhelming consensus was, however, that bureaucratic restrictions often curtail the school’s community service initiative—when asked to rank how much technicalities restrict individuals’ community service involvement (on the same scale) students responded by giving Vestal an average score of about 7.

Perhaps the scariest statistic of all was the eerily similar responses to the question “Why do you volunteer?” Over 50 of the 100 people surveyed stated that they volunteer either because their parents force them or because they think it looks good for colleges. This fact reveals that although we may be getting people to volunteer, we are not getting them to volunteer for the right reasons. Although some may argue that motivations are irrelevant when it comes to volunteering and that all that matters is the end result, such arguments could not be further from the truth. If we want people to continually volunteer at all age levels we must teach them that it is fun, if this notion is not properly conveyed then all we will have is a group of students temporarily subscribing to a carved path. Community service and the idea of stewardship should be a perpetual concept and should be taken into consideration whenever actively making a decision.

Despite the negative connotations of the survey results, there were some good statistics. Slightly over 60% of the seniors surveyed said that they volunteer in some club to some extent. When asked how their school encourages community service the overwhelming majority of the students responded “Through clubs.” The IB Diploma and the PIG community service requirements were distant seconds.

Throughout my research I have dealt with numerous politicians and officials. I found many New York State politicians to be extremely helpful. Many of them share with AACTeens a similar passion for community service. Donna Lupardo, one of our New York State Assemblywomen, personally stated that she often makes guest appearances within public schools in order to encourage civic awareness and stewardship.

Encouraging community service at the State level is a particularly touchy issue especially in today’s environment of political correctness with an ever-growing number of lawsuits. Although it may appear that I was quite critical of my state’s attempts to foster and encourage community awareness, this is not the case. Quite the contrary, I applaud NYS for their efforts and am simply critical so as to offer other states a way of improving on the New York State model. It is my opinion that New York

State has acted appropriately in this matter, mandating community service at the state level would lead to far too many complaints, perhaps quietly encouraging schools at the local level is the best way to go.

In short, although many of New York State's community service initiatives are manipulated by students, they are still better than nothing. Students will always find a way around things, the best one can do is try and hope for the best. Schools should sponsor more after-school field trips so kids can see the fruits of their labor and experience the gratification associated with community service which is, after all, the essence of volunteering. In an ideal world kids would volunteer because they want to, not just because they are required to, however, since we don't live in a utopia it is a good idea to at least open kids' minds to the idea of community service.

Our capacity for compassion and care has propelled the human race to greatness. The dazzling cities of our civilizations are testament to our ability to care for another and to work together. Caring for others in our society not only betters a community but also raises its citizens to new heights of ethical integrity. Kindness, compassion, benevolence, concern, consideration, I believe these characteristics to be intrinsic to each and every person, it is, after all, what makes us human.

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