Viewpoints

Service Movement Creates Opportunities for After-School

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by Peter Kleinbard

What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility: a recognition on the part of every American that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world.

– President Barack Obama's Inaugural Address

The Obama administration's vision of service for people of all ages offers a transformative moment for many out-of-school-time (OST) programs – even those that are not primarily service programs. Taking advantage of that opportunity will require hard work and sound infrastructure on which to mount local efforts.

Experience with after-school programs suggests ways they can take a leading role in building local service efforts. Having been widely established in schools and community organizations throughout the country, these programs offer both the infrastructure and flexibility to create engaging and active learning opportunities.

Here are some examples of service work that many OST programs can emulate.

Community Organizing: In Minneapolis and in New York's Washington Heights, young people and adults who are members of local Beacon Centers plan and implement annual community conferences that bring together people of all ages to identify issues and then implement action projects.

(Beacons are school-based centers, operated by local organizations, that serve the community and are guided by a community/youth development philosophy. Although my organization helped to develop Beacons, the ideas behind them are now widely applied in OST programs.)

Teaching: In New York City, the After School Corporation's Community Scholars Program trains high school students to teach science to younger children.

Hospital Helpers: In a Denver after-school center operated by Catholic Charities, elementary school students deliver prescription drugs to elderly people in hospitals, using baskets they have decorated.

Anti-Violence: In San Francisco, facilitators from a gang prevention program are called to intervene in neighborhood situations that threaten to become violent. Youth participants in this same program are trained to run group activities with other young people that build understanding of the conditions that lead to gang violence, increase personal efficacy and reduce gang tensions. The program is funded by the city's Public Health Department and operated by San Francisco's Urban Services YMCA.

Cultural Preservation: In the Canarsie Section of Brooklyn, residents established a Beacon Center to preserve their West Indian heritage. Among the activities, young people help to organize a major parade that celebrates their heritage. They also create floats for the parade and play in a steel band that performs West Indian music in their community.

Neighborhood Revitalization: In Sunset Park in Brooklyn, a neighborhood schoolyard – once a dangerous spot where gangs gathered – has been transformed into a place where the kaleidoscope of neighborhood ethnicities gather to play and work together. The effort was organized by the Beacon Center's director who, with parents and youth, engaged the police, the school and the gangs to redesign and create the outdoor space.

In these examples, after-school program leaders recognize that opportunities to contribute to others are valuable, not only for those who get the help, but also for the learning and growth experiences they provide for the young people who do the helping. Decades of research has demonstrated the value to young people of taking on responsible roles ranging from teaching to improving the environment. (See, for example, Youth Tutoring Youth, National Commission on Resources for Youth; Still Serving, Abt Associates; and Youth in Decision-Making: A Study on the Impacts of Youth on Adults and Organizations, by S. Zeldin and others.)

Research shows us that the most powerful service programs provide structured opportunities for young people to identify community needs and work with adult partners to develop projects that address them. They also require that young people reflect on their work and interact with those who receive services in order to assess and refine their approaches. Because service programs require an understanding and responsiveness to local needs, it is important that funding be flexible, to let organizations and individuals make decisions about how to use resources.

The results are encouraging. In New York City, organizations that have operated such programs have grown and expanded their services. Community-based organizations that started Beacons in the early 1990s have greatly expanded their services, and now apply the same principles of youth and community development to many high schools and other local services. For example, many of New York City's multiple pathways schools, which are dramatically improving graduation rates, involve community organizations as

partners. These organizations have grown because of their work on Beacons, and they use many of the youth development strategies honed in these earlier efforts.

How-to materials, reports and other information about this approach can be obtained from the Youth Development Institute (www.ydinstitute.org) and the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (www.nyc.gov/dycd).

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