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ABSTRACT

Based on the premise that school reform efforts must consider the needs of at-risk children, this paper discusses parallel reform efforts that focus on community service. The first part discusses logical linkages between community service and "at-risk" education and describes how Arizona is attempting to formalize these linkages within the state context of school reform. The Serve-America program, which arose from passage of the National and Community Service Act of 1990, allocates funds to states for school-based community-service programs in grades K-12. Through formalized school-community agency and youth organization/community agency partnerships, Arizona's Serve-America project is designed to: (1) encourage school-age and out-of-school youth to volunteer their services for the benefit of others in their communities; (2) increase the number of adult volunteers in Arizona's schools; (3) provide productive, meaningful experiences for participants; and (4) emphasize coordination of community agencies to avoid duplication and maximize utilization of local resources. Together, Arizona's Serve-America programs have involved over 3,300 youth and adult volunteers who provided over 11,500 hours of community service in the areas of education, community improvement, human services, public safety, and conservation. Participants reported positive changes in their attitudes and behaviors as a result of their community service and service learning participation. (LMI)

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Across the nation and in Arizona, economic and social indicators suggest that increasing numbers of children are growing up in poverty, and in families that find it difficult to provide a nurturing and supportive environment. Accompanying this disturbing trend, dramatic increases are seen in the incidence of "risk behaviors" among youth.

Many of these same indicators contribute to a child's risk of academic failure. Such indicators include poverty, family background, teenage parenthood, substance abuse, school history (e.g., low achievement), and attitudinal characteristics (e.g., lack of vocational goals). The effect of these indicators on education can not be overlooked.

Harold Hodgkinson of the Center for Demographic Policy, Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, D.C., likens American education to a house with a leaky roof (1991, p.10). He states:

"The leaky roof in our educational house is a metaphor for the spectacular changes that have occurred in the nature of children who come to school. [and] until we pay attention to these changes, our tinkering with the rest of the house will continue to produce no important results."

Hodgkinson stresses that educational reform efforts will *not* make a difference until we deal with "at-risk" students -- i.e., the many school-aged children who are "destined for school failure because of poverty, neglect, sickness, handicapping conditions, and lack of adult protection and nurturance" (p.10).

This paper concurs that school reform efforts *must* take into account the needs of at-risk children. It also discusses parallel reform efforts focusing on community service. The authors point out logical linkages between community service and "at-risk" education, and discuss how Arizona is attempting to formalize these linkages within the state context of school reform.

Nationally...

- ▶ Child poverty increased from 16 to 17.9 percent of the population between 1979 and 1989 -- a rate change of 12 percent
- ▶ The firearm death rate for teenagers ages 15 to 19 increased 43 percent between 1984 and 1988.
- ▶ In 1990 almost one-quarter of surveyed 12-to-17-year-olds reported having used illicit drugs (other than alcohol and tobacco) at some time in their lives.
- ▶ Sixty to 70 percent of all teenagers try alcohol or tobacco by age 15.
- ▶ In 1989, the birth rate for women ages 15 to 19 was the highest since 1973.

In Arizona...

- ▶ Child poverty increased from 16.5 to 21.7 percent of the population between 1979 and 1989 -- a rate change of 32 percent.
- ▶ Juvenile arrests for violent crimes increased 83 percent between 1985 and 1990.
- ▶ Reported first use of marijuana at age 13 or younger increased 20 percent between 1988 and 1990; reported first use of cocaine among this age group increased 12 percent.
- ▶ By the time Arizona students reach high school, nearly 75 percent will have tried alcohol.
- ▶ Arizona's births to teens ages 13 to 18 increased 22 percent between 1985 and 1990.

Sources: Children's Defense Fund, *The State of America's Children 1992*; Kosnreich, Sandler & Hall, *Kids Count Factbook: Arizona's Children, 1992*; MacFarlane, *Arizona's Alarming Trends 1992*.

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Community Service Legislation

One of the main purposes of public education is to produce caring, contributing citizens. School, where young people spend much of their time, is the obvious institution through which to initiate community service opportunities. The passage of the *National and Community Service Act of 1990* (P.L. 101-610) established a foundation for programs linking community service with schools. The newly adopted *National Service Trust Act of 1993* extends this school reform effort even further.¹

The 1990 act authorized \$287 million over a three-year period to support the development of an array of service opportunities. The purpose of the act is to foster a lifelong sense of civic responsibility among U.S. citizens regardless of age, gender, creed, color, or socio-economic status. By creating service opportunities that build on the existing organization framework of federal, state, and local programs and agencies, the act seeks to generate additional service hours each year to help meet human, educational, environmental, and public safety needs -- particularly those needs relating to poverty. By performing community service, it is hoped that the "life chances" of the young will be improved through acquisition of literacy and job skills.

The act also encourages organizations to collaborate to expand community service opportunities to more youth. Overseeing the act, the Commission on National and Community Service (CNCS) offers competitive grants to states in four program areas. One of these areas, the *Serve-America* program, allocates funds to states for school-based community service programs in grades K-12.

The *Serve-America* Program

Nationally, *Serve-America* encourages schools and community-based agencies to develop community service opportunities for in-school and out-of-school youth, and promote adult volunteerism in the schools. Activities are provided that enable students or out-of-school youth to perform meaningful and constructive service in the community. They can be school-based or community agency-based opportunities, and can be curricular (i.e., integrated with an academic program) or extra-curricular.

Beyond the notion of volunteer service, *Serve-America* places high value on the concept of service learning. Service learning activities prompt students to formally *reflect* on their volunteer service.

Students are encouraged to think about how academic concepts are applied in the context of community service and to think about themselves and how to care about others and their community.

In its endorsement of service learning as part of the school curriculum, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD, 1993) notes:

"Initial research findings suggest that student service coupled with preparation and reflection contribute to academic learning as well as character development. Service learning is a recognized means of addressing the alarming lack of tolerance and compassion demonstrated by many students. Students today need ways of making a demonstrable, positive difference in the lives of others."

Community Service as an Educational Strategy for At-Risk Youth

Many people view community service as a way of developing a sense of altruism in young people. This view meshes with a belief that schools should teach young people to care for others and relate to their community. Another perspective is that community service is valuable as an alternative method of learning and teaching. In this sense, emphasis is placed on connecting service experiences with learning concepts as part of a formal curriculum. Whatever philosophy guides their implementation in the schools, multiple benefits are associated with community service and service learning experiences (William T. Grant Foundation, 1988; Minnesota Department of Education, 1992).

Clearly, community service can benefit *all* students. It is a means by which young people can feel connected to and responsible for their community. It is a vehicle for connecting school to work. It is a method through which schools, families, and communities can redefine their roles to become collaborative contributors to their society.

Beyond its advantages for all students, however, community service is increasingly being recognized as a promising practice in working with at-risk youth. As illustrated earlier, increasing numbers of students fit the risk profile. Community service and service learning programs address many of the indicators that contribute to students' risk of academic failure. Thus it makes sense for community service to be considered as one possible educational strategy for working with at-risk students.

Community service and service learning can best be understood as strategies for at-risk youth by examining their "fit" with successful dropout prevention practices. These practices include mentoring, tutoring, alternative programs and flexible scheduling, community and business collaboration, and workforce readiness and career counseling. In addition, experiential, hands-on learning and working with responsible adults are strategies that "work" for at-risk youth. *Most of these components are central to service learning programs*; as such, community service/service learning appears to offer a creative opportunity and viable strategy to reach at-risk students (Duckenfield & Swanson, National Dropout Prevention Center, 1992).

"Typically, disadvantaged youths are thought of as recipients of service, not givers. But such efforts can play an instrumental role in reducing the chance of dropping out of school or other poor outcomes among participants. Given proper guidance, direction, and supervision, young people respond well to the responsibility of service and sense the value of their efforts. This in turn increases youths' self-esteem and the likelihood of their becoming productive adults."

Heffernan & Tarlov, Children's Defense Fund (1989, p.5)

Linking At-Risk Education and Community Service in Arizona

Arizona has a solid history of working with at-risk students. Beginning in the mid 1980s and continuing today, several legislative initiatives provide additional financial assistance to many of the state's school districts to support services for at-risk students. With the passage of H.B. 2217 in 1988 the legislature initiated a significant at-risk education pilot project.

The legislation provided four years of funding for 55 pilot at-risk demonstration sites statewide. The purpose of the *Arizona At-Risk Pilot Project* was to encourage schools to develop innovative strategies to address the needs of at-risk students, and to integrate those strategies with other programs within the

schools. One of the results of the pilot project was the development of a set of recommendations to essentially expand and restructure program support for at-risk youth in Arizona. Along with other state initiatives (e.g., Governor's Task Force on Education), the recommendations engendered notable education-related legislative action.

Anticipating the passage of comprehensive education reform legislation, the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) is developing state strategies for providing technical assistance to districts seeking to improve at-risk programs and services. A major intent of the department is to determine how the myriad of federal and state-funded programs can best be integrated in order to deliver comprehensive and effective services to at-risk -- and *all* -- students.

In the 1992-93 school year, ADE received a federal *Serve-America* grant totalling \$201,588. Rather than view this program as "one more piece," the department is examining this initiative within the overall context of school reform, and as part of the framework of strategies within which to address the needs of the state's at-risk youth. As such, the *Arizona Serve-America* program will be integrated under the "umbrella" of comprehensive services.

Through formalized school/community agency and youth organization/community agency partnerships, Arizona's *Serve-America* project is designed to: 1) encourage school-age and out-of-school youth to volunteer their services for the benefit of others in their communities; 2) increase the number of adults who volunteer in Arizona's schools; 3) provide productive, meaningful educational experiences for participants; and 4) emphasize coordination and linking of community agencies to avoid duplication of effort and to promote maximum utilization of local resources.

ADE awarded mini-grants of \$7500 to 17 sites, including schools and community-based agencies. These 17 programs began operating in February and April of 1993. Most used their state mini-grants to build upon existing volunteer programs; some initiated new projects, using their grants as "seed money." Programs targeted diverse groups of students and adults. In addition, three programs specifically targeted adult volunteers to work in programs designed to improve the education of at-risk students, school dropouts, and out-of-school youth.

Morrison Institute for Public Policy, Arizona State University, is conducting an evaluation of the state's *Serve-America* program. To date, Morrison Institute analysts have reported that in spite of relatively short periods of operation (i.e., three to five months), the programs appear to have achieved positive results.

Collectively, they involved over 3300 youth and adult volunteers who provided more than 11,500 hours of community service in the areas of education, community improvement, human services, public safety, and conservation and environment. Thousands of Arizonans benefitted from these services, including preschool and elementary children and the elderly. Volunteers and staff alike attested to positive personal changes in attitudes and behaviors as a result of their community service and service learning participation (cf. Sandler & Vandegrift, 1993).

In the coming months, the challenge for evaluators -- and the state -- is to examine the *Serve-America* program within the state's broader social context and education reform movement. Not only will these programs be analyzed in terms of their outcomes for all participants, but also with respect to their potential as intervention strategies for at-risk youth.

One national and state education reform goal is for schools to integrate effective programs in order to create comprehensive services that meet the needs of their unique student populations. A goal of Arizona's *Serve-America* evaluation is to illustrate how community service/service learning "fits" among the repertoire of school- and community-based programs as part of a comprehensive educational package.

ENDNOTE

1. The *National Service Trust Act of 1993* was introduced in Congress as H.R. 2010 in the House and S. 919 in the Senate and passed in September 1993. The act includes provisions for individuals who work for minimum wage in full-time community service positions to "earn" as much as \$4725 extra per year (up to two years). These "educational awards" can be redeemed by recipients for postsecondary education or training within five years of receiving them (cf. *Phi Delta Kappa*, 1993).

While the act does not specifically target low-income or at-risk populations, ramifications for such populations are clear. Students in impoverished areas -- typically those considered most at-risk of educational failure -- will have improved opportunities to access postsecondary education through participation in community service. Increased access to higher education has potential to ameliorate the economic consequences of low levels of education. In sum, community service opportunities under the *National Service Trust Act of 1993* offer young people a chance to break the "cycle of poverty" and contribute to the economic growth and development of the nation.

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Comments and suggestions are welcome.

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