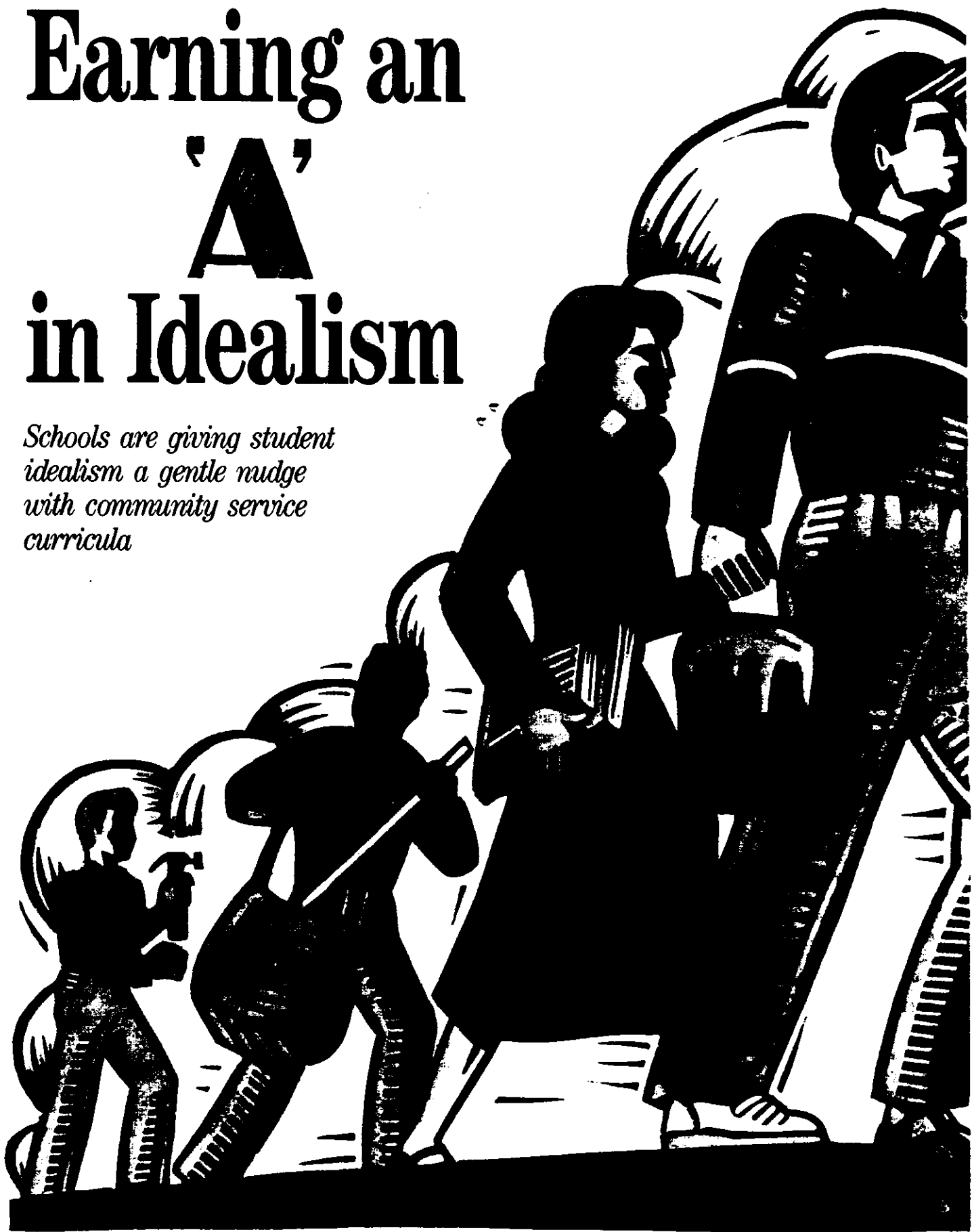


Earning an 'A' in Idealism

*Schools are giving student
idealism a gentle nudge
with community service
curricula*



IN MINNEAPOLIS, junior high students shovel snow for the disabled, read to the blind, and help nursing-home residents balance their checkbooks. In Philadelphia, high school students operate an official monitoring station for the Environmental Protection Agency. And in Ellington, Conn., high school students serve on the town's rescue squad.

They're all part of a ground-swell effort among schools nationwide to incorporate community service into students' everyday lives. All across the U.S., in fact, schools are experimenting with mandatory community service programs and elective courses in service and citizenship. Some schools are offering service-based intervention programs for at-risk youngsters, and some are developing K-12 curricula that weave community service into every subject at every grade level.

The goal is to use the community as

a classroom where students can learn important lessons in responsibility and citizenship—lessons, some say, that the Me Generation might not learn otherwise. And along the way, proponents of community service programs point out, the experience can bolster students' self-esteem, improve their academic achievement, and perhaps revive flagging interest in school.

The idea of such school-based initiatives isn't entirely new—some schools have had Key Clubs, food drives, and Honor Society service requirements for years. But school-based community service as a national goal is at a crossroads, say experts who spoke with *The American School Board Journal*.

"Right now, youth service is basically a lot of grass-roots efforts that rely on the vitality and energy of some intense individuals," says Catherine A. Rolzinski, director of education for Youth Service America, a Washington, D.C., advocacy group for youth service opportunities. In fact, Rolzinski continues, "Nobody would even have called [school-based service] a movement until the last couple of years."

That might be changing, though, as school-based service programs grow in number and sophistication. During the past year, the idea of a student service requirement received considerable attention from Congress and the President. That national attention, combined with increased interest in school restructuring, leads advocates to predict, tentatively, that school-based youth service programs just might be primed to move from the margins of education to the mainstream.

The status of service

What's school-based service like on the margins? Figures are muddy. Generally, though, private schools are more likely to require community service than public schools are, and by a wide margin: According to the National Association of Independent Schools, 25 percent of private schools require service for graduation. According to researchers Fred Newmann and Robert Rutter, only 4 percent of public schools do.

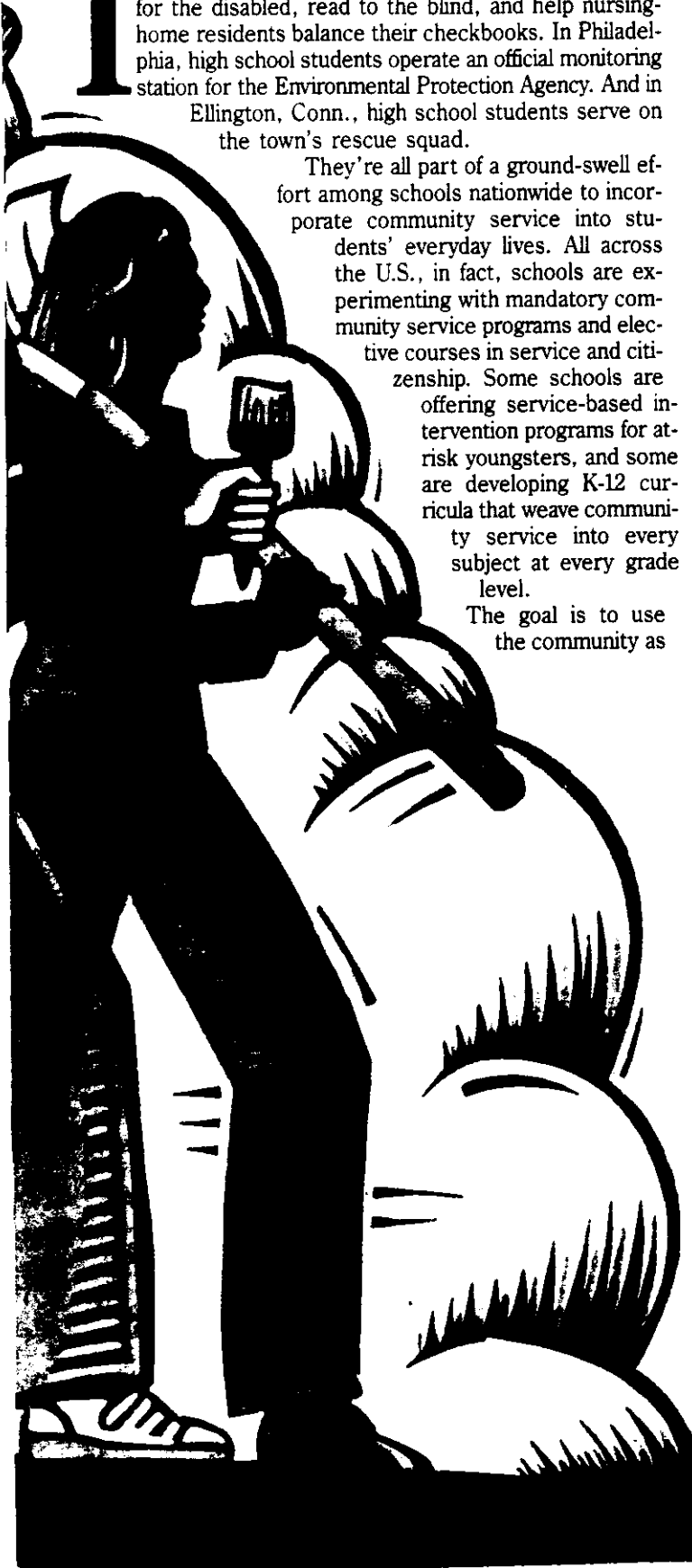
Reasons for the low numbers are easy to find: Many schools worry that service will divert time from academics, while others are reluctant to use youngsters to do work that state and local governments should be doing. Still others are legitimately wary of the hidden costs: The youngsters' time might be freely given, but administrative costs for a good service program can mount up.

Whatever the obstacles, though, more schools seem to be turning to community service if not as a requirement, at least as an option. And they cite some persuasive reasons for doing so: Proponents of school-based service—including former Maryland State Superintendent of Schools David W. Hornbeck—note that students who participate in community service develop responsible attitudes toward others, gain self-esteem, and improve attendance and behavior. They also learn important lessons about the work ethic and develop a feeling of belonging—no small accomplishment for youths who might be isolated or self-absorbed.

Consider the following examples:

- In Atlanta, high school students must volunteer at least

Donna Harrington-Lueker is an associate editor of The American School Board Journal.



75 hours of their time and earn half a credit in community service before they graduate. The five-year-old program, brainchild of former Atlanta Superintendent Alonzo Crim, has served as a model for other school systems as well. The Detroit and Cherry Creek, Colo., schools already have similar requirements for their high school students, and in Washington, D.C., the school board has voted to require students to complete 100 hours of service before graduating, effective in 1991.

• In Minneapolis, more than 400 youngsters in the city's 12 junior high schools currently participate in Fresh Force, an innovative community service program that provides \$500 grants for projects in the students' own neighborhoods. Students plan the projects—anything from cleaning up neighborhood parks to shoveling snow for the elderly—and work on them during school, after school, or on weekends, while a student board of directors dispenses funds. "Kids just learn through service," says Mary Spindler, director of student activities for the Minneapolis public schools. "They learn leadership and self-esteem, and they just do better in school. . . ."

And it happens whether the youngster comes from a low socioeconomic background or a high one."

• In Pittsburgh, eighth-graders identified as being at risk because of attendance problems, low grades, or poor behavior can take part in a school system program called OASES (Occupational and Academic Skills for Employment of Students). Youngsters spend half their school day in the classroom and half in the community, working on projects they've voted to complete. One OASES class, for example, built a playhouse for the Pittsburgh School for the Blind. Some 20 percent of the youngsters in the program reportedly make the honor roll, and virtually all improve their attendance, grades, and attitude toward school.

• In San Antonio, the Valued Youth Partnership program identifies Hispanic youths who are in danger of dropping out and trains them to serve as peer tutors for elementary youngsters. Both groups benefit from the eight hours a week of required service: The younger students get a boost with their studies, while the older kids improve their own grades and attendance records. Most important, the older youths are

How to get high marks in effectiveness, too

Mandatory or voluntary? During school or after? For academic credit, or just for goodwill?

Schools that are about to embark on community service programs are asking the same questions and often coming up with different answers. "There's no one successful model," says Catherine A. Rolzinski, who's spent more than a year surveying U.S. community service programs as director of education for Youth Service America. "There are as many models as there are communities and schools."

But as Rolzinski and others point out, effective programs do have some traits in common:

1. *Effective programs encourage students to reflect on what they're doing and what they have learned.* Schools can't simply send youngsters out to shovel snow or serve as candy strippers. Students need the chance to reflect on what they're doing. In Atlanta, for example, students submit a paper, which is not graded, describing their experience and how it affected them. In Maryland, schools are encouraged to adopt a series of readings from the Great Books—Socrates, Montesquieu, Thomas Jefferson, and others. "We want to give youngsters the language they need to talk about service," explains Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, director of the Maryland Student Service Alliance. Some service programs ask students to keep journals, encouraging them to get beyond the perfunctory, "Went to the nursing home. Read. Came back to school"; and still others (like Minneapolis's Fresh Force) train teachers, college interns, or other adults to lead group discussions.

2. *Effective programs forge close links with the community at large.* Students must be primed for service, and community groups must be primed for students. In other words, the more contact you have with advocates for the elderly, public parks and recreation, or whatever, the more likely your program is

to succeed. Take transportation, for example. Getting youngsters from Central Middle School to a service project miles away can seem an insurmountable hurdle. Ditto matching individual students with service projects that meet their needs. But if you work your community service network effectively and stay in touch with groups needing aid, you're likely to find appropriate service opportunities close by, says Minneapolis' Mary Spindler.

3. *Effective programs build in incentives and recognition.* T-shirts, awards banquets, the chance to serve on a planning committee with adults—successful programs find many ways to bill youth service as positive and inviting, to students and community alike.

4. *Effective programs involve institutional commitment.* Top-notch community service programs are sustained and structured, not one-shot deals put together on the fly. Teachers must be trained, schedules developed, and students matched with the best service opportunities for them—all tasks that cry out for a supervisor, if the school system can afford one. Programs should be poised to grow, too, notes Mary Spindler. Now that the first of Fresh Force's young recruits have graduated from junior high, for example, the Minneapolis public schools are looking at ways the program can be extended or adapted in the high schools. The youngsters, Spindler explains, have come to expect service to be part of going to school.

Finally, should a service program be mandatory or voluntary? No firm consensus exists on this point, though the scales might tip slightly in favor of voluntary programs. "The program should be so exciting and interesting that everyone will want to do it," maintains Rolzinski. "You want to keep that vital energy going, not shrink service down to some common denominator."—D.H.-L.

more likely to stay in school. The dropout rate among Hispanic students hits 65 percent nationwide and reaches 44 percent in San Antonio, but the dropout rate in the Valued Youth Partnership program is only 6 percent.

• Springfield, Mass., has taken what many youth service advocates consider the next step: weaving service into the curriculum in every grade, from kindergarten to grade 12, in each of the city's 40 schools. The "service by immersion" approach begins with a schoolwide project, such as providing a free lunch for as many as 100 needy people. Kindergartners might bring canned food from home, while second-graders make place mats in art class and third-graders learn about sanitary procedures for making sandwiches. "By the time these youngsters leave school," says Ann Southworth, assistant superintendent of instruction, "we want service to be a part of their lives."

At the state level, Minnesota and Pennsylvania both provide state funds for school-based service programs, and Maryland requires local school systems to offer community service as a high school elective. (The Maryland State Board of Education adopted the requirement for elective community service in 1985—three years after it spurned an attempt by former State School Superintendent David W. Hornbeck to require that all students perform 100 hours of community service to graduate.)

A fourth state—Vermont—has a privately funded program called SerVermont, which provides grants for student service projects.

What's next?

So why, despite these gains, isn't the idea of school-based service whipping across the country like a prairie fire before a west wind?

"Nothing new happens without strong advocacy," observes Kathleen Kennedy Townsend. The eldest daughter of Robert F. Kennedy, Townsend has directed the Maryland Student Service Alliance for a little over a year and has stumped the state to build support for the state-mandated high school elective and for school-based youth service in general.

It takes time. Only 40 of the state's 234 high schools (in 16 of Maryland's 24 school systems) offer elective credits in community service, despite the fact that the state board of education passed the service regulation almost five years ago. Townsend aims to jack up both of those numbers and have 70 high schools and all 24 school systems participating next year.

Even in Pennsylvania, where Governor Robert P. Casey has been a strong advocate of youth service and where schools can apply for \$5,000 grants for school-based service, the number of schools lining up to come on board isn't a long one yet. This year, in fact, only 59 Pennsylvania high schools applied for youth service grants, despite the efforts of PennServe, the governor's office of volunteer programs, and a public relations blitz in the state school board magazine.

The reason? "If you do [service learning] right in school, you don't run the school the same way," contends John Briscoe, a former Peace Corps volunteer and current director of PennServe, Pennsylvania's state office of volunteer programs. (PennServe provides \$5,000 grants for school-based service.) In fact, according to Briscoe and other advocates, school-based community service, done well, involves a commitment to experiential learning and a revision of the teacher's role in the class-

room (the teacher lectures less and involves youngsters more).

Using this line of argument, many community service advocates look hopefully at school restructuring: Given similar ends and means, community service just could piggyback on the drive toward professionalism, site-based management, and school reform, they say.

Other hurdles—transportation, insurance, scheduling, and general administrivia—deter some schools, though these are easily surmounted, advocates and school people alike maintain. The Springfield public schools, for example, put a service elective in place within a month and revamped the K-12 curriculum between January and September; in fact, the first year the program operated, says Ann Southworth, every school in the system did a community service project.

"It's a question of priorities," maintains Townsend, who fields questions about funding and logistics as she travels to schools throughout Maryland. "If it's important to be an effective citizen, then you just do it." Some schools have; many haven't.

A federal infusion

So school-based community service remains just that: a local effort to meet local needs. At the national level, though, both Congress and President George Bush are working to turn a spotlight on community service. President Bush's program, unveiled just after Christmas, asks Congress for \$25 million annually to fund a private foundation (called the Points of Light Initiative Foundation) that would encourage local community service—including school-based service—but would not provide federal funds.

Also on Capitol Hill, though, is Senator Edward M. Kennedy's (D-Mass.) ServeAmerica bill, which calls for a five-year program that would provide \$100 million annually in start-up grants for youth service programs. Sixty-five million of that money—"no inconsiderable sum," in the words of Frank Slobig, codirector of Youth Service America—is earmarked for K-12 service programs, to be divvied up among the states according to traditional funding formulas. The aim, says Slobig, is to provide the funds needed to build a school's community service infrastructure: its capacity to coordinate and administer school-based service projects.

Kennedy's bill, which Slobig says has "strong bipartisan support," was reported out of committee last term and was expected to come before the full Senate in late February or early March.

Federal money alone won't move service-learning into the mainstream, though. As Catherine Rolzinski of Youth Service America points out, educators must have solid research—not just anecdotal evidence—showing that community service produces cognitive, social, and academic gains. And if youth service is to become a national movement, Rolzinski observes, it will need to identify and build on the best existing programs, develop a good national clearinghouse, and put together an effective national network for sharing ideas and expertise. Little of that kind of national coordination exists, yet.

Until it does, and even when it does, local school boards like yours will remain at the center of the youth service movement. And for good reason: Not only do you make policy, but you're in the citizenship business.

"Look at a school's mission statement," says Rolzinski. "It includes citizenship building. Now we need to start looking at the community as a laboratory for citizenship." **SB**