

Testimony before the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service

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Creating an Expectation of Service Hearing: Civic Education and Service in Schools

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Chairman Heck and members of the Commission,

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before you on this critical topic of deep importance to me. While I may not have same years of professional experience in this field, I am extremely passionate about public service, civic engagement, and service-learning. I am grateful for this platform to share my experiences as a student as well as a servant-leader.

Over the past three years, I have worked with the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) in a variety of capacities, and I continue to do so as their Youth Advisory Council Mentor. NYLC works to create a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world with young people, their schools, and their communities through service-learning. Their programs and services develop young leaders, support educators, and advance the field of service-learning.

As with a lot of the terminology used in civic education and public service, there are multiple definitions and interpretations of what service-learning is and what quality practice looks like. NYLC defines Service-Learning as “an approach to teaching and learning in which students use academic knowledge and skills to address genuine community needs.” Service-learning can be a very effective way of engaging and empowering students, delivering measurable results in civic participation, and connecting schools to their communities. However if not implemented with quality, it can have a negative impact on students and communities.¹ There are many types of projects and units that may fall under the name of service-learning, yet do not incorporate the essential qualities of effective service-learning.

In 2008, NYLC worked with leaders in the field to develop the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice. These standards clarify the components of effective service-learning, based on a wealth of high-quality research studies². Through the research and review process, they

¹ Eby, John. "Why service-learning is bad." (1998).

² RMC Research Corporation. Standards and Indicators for Effective Service-Learning Practice. Scotts Valley, CA: National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2008.
<http://portal.kidscarecenter.com/sites/ServiceLearning/Document%20Library/1/1/K-12%20SL%20Standards%20for%20Quality%20Practice.pdf>

found that high-quality service-learning requires: (1) meaningful service, (2) intentional link to curriculum, (3) reflection, (4) diversity among participants, (5) youth voice, (6) mutually beneficial partnerships, (7) ongoing progress monitoring, and (8) appropriate duration and intensity to meet community needs and outcomes.³ These standards are best practices in the service-learning field and are used by educators to design and assess their projects. These standards are also valuable in defining the qualities that distinguish service-learning from other educational approaches, including community service and volunteering.

While all eight standards are essential to the makeup of an effective project, I would like to speak to the particular importance of meaningful service and youth voice. From my experiences, these qualities have been particularly influential in shaping my level of civic engagement. One of the indicators of meaningful service-learning is that it addresses issues that are personally relevant to the participants. The issues that are personally relevant to participants may be difficult and uncomfortable to address. They may be contemporary and controversial. I think that educators should not shy away from issues that are of particular relevance to a modern context. These types of issues are what really draw students in and create the connection between their academic skills and their practical applications. Meaningful service-learning also encourages participants to understand their service experiences in the context of the underlying societal issues being addressed. I think there is a perception of service as only volunteerism or direct service, working on addressing the impacts to these issues. However, effective service-learning goes beyond that and really frames issues in terms of their deeper root causes. This is essential to ensuring that students have an in-depth and accurate understanding of where their service activities fit into the larger societal systems.

My generation is experiencing a sense of urgency around issues of climate change, gun violence, mental health, women's reproductive rights, and others. These types of issues are not very clear cut, with a lot of room for differing values and opinions. These issues, while they do have impacts on the local levels, have larger-level solutions that need to be implemented through advocacy and systems change. I feel that we are as a generation more inclined towards tackling issues from their root causes, rather than volunteering time in a traditional sense. Service-learning is an approach that has the potential to tap into the passions of students and this desire to understand the issues relevant to our lives.

Youth voice within service-learning means involving young people in the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes, through sharing decision-making and the creation of a supportive of a trusting environment. I believe that this has so much potential to elevate the quality of civic engagement in service-learning. Effective youth voice from the perspective of

³ National Youth Leadership Council, K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice, <https://www.nylc.org/page/standards>

adults means having trust in the ability of young people to make informed decisions and being willing to understand your own assumptions about working of youth. From the perspective of young people, it means being willing to reach out for advice and support and speaking out about our own experiences. Giving students autonomy and helping them become confident advocating in their own voices has been associated with higher academic and civic engagement. ⁴

I believe that when decisions are being made about young people and our generation, our voices should be invited into the conversation and taken seriously. This includes giving youth autonomy within service-learning projects, as well as creating positions for deeper youth involvement in youth-serving organizations and agencies. I think you need to get young people thinking systemically about civic engagement, because we are the most effective people to communicate and engage our peers! There are many young people who are civically engaged who are passionate about engaging other people around them, however they may not have the support or the resources to be effective. Youth can bring much needed fresh perspectives and energy to these conversations.

NYLC has demonstrated what implementing effective youth-adult partnerships can look like within an organization, through the Youth Advisory Council, which has been a central element throughout the history of the organization. In the beginning of my term with NYLC, I was very daunted and intimidated by being asked to give my input and help guide the structure of one of our campaigns. However, I saw the other members of the cohort speak confidently, vocalize their concerns and questions, and really owning their voices. As I continued to work with the staff on various projects and tasks, I learned that they really trusted me and respected my opinions, which helped me grow much more confident. Today, I feel empowered to share my perspective as a student without filtering or diluting my message, and I am not afraid to point out the lack of structural support for uplifting youth voice.

In order to implement these practices (making service meaningful and implementing genuine youth voice) and achieve the outcomes we are hoping to achieve, it is essential to invest financially in service-learning and civic engagement. Even if educators would like to bring service-learning into their schools, there is already a shortage of resources being funneled towards education, and service-learning can add a greater strain. The federal government distributing grants to fund non-federal education authorities has been shown to be effective in increasing the quality and impacts of service-learning. From 1993 to 2011, Learn and Serve America (LSA) created a federal stream of funding dedicated to service-learning in PK-12

⁴ Billig, S. H., Root, S., & Jesse, D. (2005). The relationship between quality indicators of service-learning and student outcomes: Testing professional wisdom. In S. Root, J. Callahan, & S. H. Billig (Eds.), *Advances in service-learning research: Vol. 5. Improving service-learning practice: Research on models to enhance impacts* (pp. 97– 115). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.

schools.⁵ This funding allowed service-learning to reach between 4 million and 5 million students per year.⁶ Since this funding was cut, the field of service-learning has been drastically reduced. Organizations like NYLC do not have as much capacity to continue creating valuable resources to advance the field, states do not have the resources to create strong infrastructure to support school districts, and educators often cannot access the professional development and training needed to implement truly effective service-learning. If a new federal grant program similar to Learn and Serve America were implemented, it could lead to flourishing growth within the field of civic-education, by allowing organizations to continue developing resources and creating a strong incentive for implementing stronger civic-education programs.

In New Jersey, the civic education standards are embedded within the social studies standards. This often means civic engagement is an afterthought for our history teachers, who are already overwhelmed with the task of getting through the state mandated curriculum. Even if they see the value in civic-education, they do not have the resources or the authority to implement it. Any kind of incentive for administrators to implement stronger service-learning and civic engagement, whether it be creating prestige through award and recognition programs or creating funding availability through grants, would support them in their ability to focus on civic engagement.

Personally, the most impactful experiences in my civic engagement have not come from within the classroom, they have come from being engaged with various causes and organizations outside of school. When I was 12 years old, I attended Youth Empowered Action (YEA) Camp, a week-long youth leadership summer camp. This experience showed me that I did not need to wait until I was an adult in order to make an impact on the world around me. I met like-minded young people who enjoyed spending their time working on projects to address social inequalities. After YEA Camp, I was inspired to take action on an issue that resonated with me, which was climate change. I felt that I had a responsibility to do something with my time and energy to serve others and better the world. I started to organize campaigns and projects at my middle school to educate those around me about climate change, its impacts, and the obstacles to climate action. I learned about the importance of implementing policies to regulate environmental protections and incentivize climate action, and I found out that one of the largest barriers to passing climate legislation was lobbying from the fossil fuel industry. After finding this out, I did a lot of research about my politicians and how I could influence them and speak out about this

⁵ Molly Ryan, Service-Learning After Learn and Serve America: How Five States Are Moving Forward (Denver: Education Commission of the States, June 2012), <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/02/87/10287.pdf>

⁶ Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Policy Development, Community Service and Service-Learning in America's Schools (Nov. 2008), 17, http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/08_1112_lsa_prevalence.pdf.

issue. A group of my friends and I petitioned my congressman to sign the No Fossil Fuel Money pledge.

Although we were not successful, it definitely opened our eyes to the ways you can engage with the political system, and for me, it inspired me to continue staying informed on the actions of my representatives and reaching out to them about my perspective. After I had this connection, I viewed my education through this lens and found a new sense of purpose in my classes. Since then, I have worked on environmental action in a variety of different ways, including creating a statewide student-led environmental coalition, organizing a school strike for climate, and most recently, stepping up to the position of Chief Executive Officer of Greening Forward, a youth-led environmental organization that empowers young environmentalists to take more effective action. My passion for the environment gave me a very strong personal reason to become civically engaged and utilize my voice. My involvement with NYLC allowed me to connect with like-minded young leaders, discover a greater understanding of my potential as a public servant, and become comfortable speaking out as a young person even in spaces that are not supportive of youth voice.

I know that my experience with civic-engagement may not be representative of an average high-school student, however I know that I am not alone. There are many other young people in my generation who are taking initiative in their own communities in profound and powerful ways. There are many in my generation eager to serve, however there are many young people who are disengaged from service simply because the support is not there. I am incredibly grateful that I have had so many opportunities to take advantage of that have led me to my position today.

I appreciate this opportunity to testify before the Commission and share my experiences. The work that you are doing is so valuable and I hope that I am able to contribute through my youth perspective.

Thank you,
Ananya Singh