Mandatory Volunteer Work for Teenagers, by Point/Counterpoint

Volunteer Work for Teenagers: Should It Be Mandatory?

Point: Give Teens Some Work to Do! It’s Good for Them and Everyone Else

Teenagers today live in a confusing world. The media sends many mixed messages about what it means to be a helpful person in society. One of the best ways to help teens find their way is to make volunteer work a mandatory part of their school curriculum. Some people would immediately argue that this is an unnecessary action—many teens already volunteer without it being a requirement. It’s true: teens have a propensity to volunteer more than adults. However, as a society we should make sure that not just some, but all, teens volunteer. Many of the teens that volunteer do so as part of a religious group or a youth leadership organization. In fact, 46 percent of teens who volunteer are working with a religious group or a youth leadership organization while only 18 percent of teens who volunteer are working with school-based groups. This shows that clearly the best way to include all teens in the benefits of volunteering is to add mandatory volunteer work to the school curriculum.

There are many benefits to volunteering. One obvious benefit is that volunteering helps the community—volunteers help the elderly, the disabled, and children. Furthermore, many people are able to receive food and medical assistance that they would not receive otherwise thanks to the hard work of volunteers. And let’s not forget the environment! Volunteers make our world a cleaner place by doing things like picking up trash and teaching others about recycling. However, volunteering brings advantages that many people don’t think of right away: benefits to the volunteers themselves! According to the United Way, volunteering helps people make important networking contacts, develop new skills, gain work experience, and enhance their resume. All of these benefits are crucial to teens who will soon be entering the workforce. The United Way also says that volunteering gives people the opportunity to teach their skills to others and build self-esteem and confidence. These two benefits are helpful to teens who are developing their social skills. Finally, the United Way says that volunteering improves people’s health and helps to make a difference in someone’s life, benefits that are wonderful for volunteers at any age! The numerous advantages that come from volunteering definitely warrant making volunteering a compulsory part of school curriculum.

One very specific reason to tie volunteer work to education is that teen volunteers are more likely to succeed academically than teens who don’t volunteer. Back in 2005, a collaborative study conducted by the Corporation for National and Community Service and the U.S. Census Bureau revealed that students who do better in school are more likely to be volunteers. There are numerous possible reasons for this trend. It may be because teenagers who volunteer learn new skills, or because the work helps teenagers build confidence, or because volunteering provides a sense of purpose. Whatever the reason, the abundantly clear link between students who volunteer and academic success is too important to be ignored.

What happens to teenagers who volunteer as they grow into adults? They continue to volunteer, of course! According to the United Way, volunteering as a youth will increase the chances that a person will volunteer as an adult, which makes sense given the many benefits of volunteering. Unfortunately, however, adults who were never encouraged to volunteer as youths may never start because they are oblivious of the benefits. A simple solution to this would be to make volunteer work a mandatory part of the school curriculum so that everyone will be provided the opportunity to be exposed to the helpful benefits of volunteering. Aside from the benefits to the individual volunteer, think about the benefit to society as a whole. Community service programs across the country will have a fresh new crop of enthusiastic,
lifelong volunteers to count on. Everyone knows that volunteers make the United States a better place. The more volunteers, young and old, the better!

The evidence is clear: Volunteering is beneficial to both the community and the volunteers themselves. Because the advantages of volunteering so heavily outweigh the disadvantages, it makes sense to start people on a path of volunteerism early by making volunteering a mandatory part of the school curriculum.

Counterpoint: Mandatory Volunteer Work Does More Harm Than Good

Most people agree that teenagers today live in a difficult world. There are more pressures facing the modern teen than we can count: school, work, family, sports, and other extracurricular activities, just to name a few. However, some people think that we should add to that load of pressures by making volunteer work a mandatory part of the school curriculum. One of the greatest arguments for this action is that mandatory volunteer work will prepare students for the future by giving them work experience, but the flaw in this logic is that many teens already gain work experience through paying jobs. In fact, many of the teens working paying jobs are doing so out of necessity—to pay for gas to get back and forth to school, or to help their families with extra money. Those teens without paying jobs still have plenty of prospects for gaining work experience in other ways such as an internship, or working at a school paper. Another argument for making volunteer work a mandatory part of school curriculum is that this work will help teens gain self-esteem and self-confidence. However, having time to socialize and develop hobbies and other interests is more important for self-esteem and self-confidence than volunteering.

The most compelling argument against making volunteer work a mandatory part of school curriculum is time. Teens today are just too busy to add another stressor to their lives. Let’s take a look at twenty-four hours in the life of a typical teen. Allocate eight hours per day for sleep, eight hours for school (including getting ready and travel time), three hours for homework, two hours for activities such as sports or a part-time job, two hours for dinner and family time, and one hour for socializing. These activities take up all twenty-four hours leaving scarcely any time for volunteer work. Should students have to sacrifice their one hour of socializing per day, or sacrifice an hour of precious family time? These options just don’t make sense as making more demands on teens’ packed schedules can have serious side effects. Teens who are too busy feel tired, anxious, or depressed. Studies show they often have headaches or stomachaches due to stress, missed meals, or lack of sleep and they may fall behind in school, causing their grades to suffer. These drawbacks clearly outweigh the benefits of volunteering.

Another problem with making volunteer work a mandatory part of curriculum is that it defeats the purpose of volunteering in the first place. People volunteer because they have extra time and energy to give, and they genuinely want to help. Students that are forced to volunteer may resent the demand on their time, and therefore perform the work grudgingly. This will not help to make students feel useful or helpful, which would be counterproductive. Furthermore, students will not be able to experience the positive social benefits of volunteering because they see it as a requirement rather than a positive experience. Because of forced volunteer work, students may hesitate to explore volunteering as an adult. This is a huge drawback because there are genuine benefits to volunteering when someone actually has the time and means to do so.

Finally, there is great evidence that the teens that do have the time to volunteer already do! This eliminates the need to make volunteer work mandatory. In 2005, a collaborative study on the volunteering habits of teenagers conducted by the Corporation for National and
Community Service and the U.S. Census Bureau revealed that an estimated 15.5 million teens between the ages of 12 and 18 do volunteer work. This is about 55 percent of youth, a number all the more astounding when compared to the meager 29 percent of adults who do volunteer work. They also found that young people complete more than 1.3 billion hours of volunteer work each year. These findings demonstrate that a significant number of teenagers are already participating in service to their communities when they are able. Since volunteer work is clearly popular among teenagers, it is safe to assume that the minority of teenagers who do not volunteer are only choosing not to participate because they do not have the time.

Making volunteer work a mandatory part of school curriculum may seem like a good idea at first glance. Volunteering is good for the community and offers many benefits for the person volunteering as well. However, upon further examination it becomes clear that this is not a good plan. Adding another time stressor into the lives of teenagers just isn’t worth it.

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