

Published: November 30, 2005

COMMENTARY

Working Through Trauma

A posthurricane curriculum proposal stressing the healing power of manual labor, service learning, and environmental study.

By Alberto Arenas & John J. Pedicone

As education officials in the Gulf Coast states slowly bring their schools back to life, there will be a natural tendency to return to business as usual in curricular and pedagogical practices. Maintaining the status quo for key aspects of school affairs is, in fact, appropriate, to prevent adding further stress to the lives of dislocated children and their families. But school officials also will be addressing ways to help students heal from the emotional trauma caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. An idea worth considering is to provide students the opportunity to actively participate in the reconstruction of their communities and cities. One of the most efficient strategies for doing this could be to teach them manual trades that they can put into practice almost immediately, through service learning.

Involving students in meaningful and dignified work is one of the best strategies for fostering a civic-minded nation.

Nationally, most school districts have recognized the value of service learning. Teaching children the benefits of helping others and being a part of solving real problems is a goal contemporary educational institutions recognize as important. What better way to put into practice the principles of the learning-community philosophy than to place children in the middle of a truly solution-driven learning experience? All students could participate, through age-appropriate activities, in projects that contributed to this effort. Under close adult supervision, middle and high school students could devote several hours a week to planting lawns and trees, rebuilding and painting walls, fixing plumbing systems, installing computer hardware and software, repairing school buses, and, in general, ensuring that school campuses become, once again, solidly built, well maintained, and aesthetically pleasing.

While older children could engage in more complex and physically demanding projects, younger children might handle activities that are simpler and less physically trying, for example, planting trees and taking care of them. These service-learning activities might start out on K-12 campuses, but could eventually spread to the larger reconstruction and beautification of the neighborhoods themselves.

The advantages to students would be numerous: Not only would they feel that they were part of a cause larger than themselves, but they also would learn valuable marketable skills, gain a sense of belonging to the school, learn to work collectively, develop prosocial behavior, and become more physically fit. Moreover, virtually every task that a student took part in would lend itself to providing relevance to classroom instruction.



School districts will be faced with many decisions as they approach their reconstruction efforts. This can be an opportunity for cash-strapped districts to be on the cutting edge of approaches to design and construction technology for their campuses. Increasing costs of energy and materials should cause officials to consider employing the most up-to-date technology and know-how that is at once fiscally responsible, environmentally friendly, and complementary of the learning process. In so doing, districts



—Patti Raine

would be stepping out of the cookie-cutter, fossil-fuel-run school of the 20th century, with its high operation and maintenance costs, and into the ecologically designed school of the 21st century that adapts to the local geography, uses renewable energy, and costs much less per square foot to operate. By approaching this effort as an educational venture, adults and students alike would be provided with rich information, skills, and a perspective that would be invaluable in terms of their future views and behaviors.

A combination of “green” architectural designs and construction materials that help cool buildings in the summer and heat them in the winter, along with renewable energy sources such as solar, biomass, and offshore wind (particularly suitable for the Gulf Coast states), can make a world of a difference in savings for

school districts. In 2004, the U.S. Department of Energy estimated that school districts implementing these changes could save up to 50 percent in energy costs, a highly significant amount, given that schools spend in energy alone \$8 billion per year and rising. For students to understand these economic realities, learn about principles of conservation and resource management, gain expertise in career and technical education, and see adults using intelligent approaches to planning and fiscal accountability would be worth every bit of additional time and energy this proposal would demand.

And the best part is that students could be main contributors to these innovations.

Students and administrators would not be the sole beneficiaries. Teachers would profit because they could connect the manual skills to a rigorous academic curriculum that made classes more interesting and relevant. For instance, math skills, such as estimation, measurement, algebraic calculations, and geometry, could be developed by having students determine how much electricity and money is being saved with the installation of a green lighting system.

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Parents would gain because their children would develop good work habits, a sense of personal responsibility, and manual and leadership skills. The school would profit because students’ greater involvement in school would lead to fewer discipline problems and a lower dropout rate. And society in general would benefit by having youths learn to value and take pride in manual labor, and become competent in environmentally sustainable practices.

While there would be some opportunity costs involved in having current personnel train students, these would be minimal compared with the return on investment to students, schools, families, and the society at large.

This idea will not be popular with everyone and is not without risk. Some students and parents will complain that it’s un-American to force children to work. The real question has never been whether or not to compel students to do something—after all, education is compulsory in the United States—but rather what they should be compelled to do.

Others will express concerns about student safety. Those concerns need to be addressed and precautions taken, just as schools do with any nonconventional activity, and even with traditionally risky components of the regular curriculum. Physical education and vocational teachers take such safety measures every day.

Some politicians and educators will protest that diverting students’ attention to reconstruction efforts would adversely affect test scores. The reality would be that students would spend only a few hours a week on these activities, and the act of connecting relevant activities to the curriculum could actually lift test scores. More important, the new skills would help provide a balanced education that prepares students to develop not just intellectually, which is where most schools focus, but also physically,

emotionally, and socially, which is where most schools have recognized they must move.

A how-to-implement list should probably include the following ideas:

- *Start small.* Involve initially only those schools that demonstrate an interest in pursuing this strategy to ensure its success.
- *Learn from each activity.* Apply the lessons learned to create a list of protocols that will expand with every additional project. The list should include successes and failures.
- *Keep parents informed.* Parents should be made aware of the importance of this strategy and the practices adopted to ensure the safety of children.
- *Be aware of liability policies.* This should include operational procedures and activities that fall within the limits of district coverage, and adequate coverage for participating students.
- *Engage stakeholders.* Identify teachers, parents, and other community members who have important skills needed in the reconstruction efforts and secure their willingness to share those talents.
- *Enlist support from influential leaders.* Involve politicians, labor organizers, and community leaders who can influence both public perception and sentiment in favor of this endeavor.
- *Make successes public.* Publicize concrete achievements to highlight the role of students in revitalizing the community.
- *Be patient.* Be gentle on staff members and students because, inevitably, mistakes will be made along the way; such is the nature of any valuable innovation such as this one.

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Involving students in meaningful and dignified work is one of the best strategies for fostering a civic-minded nation. Thoreau reminded us of this in his most enduring work, *Walden*, published more than 150 years ago: “[Students] should not *play* life, or *study* it merely, ... but earnestly *live* it from beginning to end. How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living?”

As devastating and painful as the consequences of the Gulf Coast hurricanes have been, they offer educators a unique opportunity to permit young people to refrain from being passive spectators of their ruined communities and become protagonists in the rebuilding of their lives.

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