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## Federal Community-Service Opportunities Expanded



President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama watch as former President Bill Clinton plants a tree while participating in a national service project at Kenilworth Aquatic Garden in Washington on April 21.— Charles Dharapak/AP

By Mary Ann Zehr

President Barack Obama signed into law yesterday legislation that greatly expands volunteer-service opportunities for Americans, including middle and high school students.

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The **Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act** reauthorizes the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 and includes the formation of several new community-service programs aimed at engaging school-age children. It intends to more than triple the number of Americans serving in AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps-like programs from 75,000 to 250,000 by 2017.

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President Obama signed the bill into law during a visit to the District of Columbia's SEED School, a public charter boarding school, which he described as "a place where service is a core component of the curriculum."

Mr. Obama called the new legislation "the boldest expansion of opportunities to serve our communities and our country since the creation of AmeriCorps," according to a [transcript of his remarks](#). "It is just the beginning of a sustained, collaborative, and focused effort to involve our greatest resource—our citizens—in the work of remaking this nation."

Accompanying President Obama during the signing were sponsors of the legislation in the U.S. Senate: Sen. Edward "Ted" M. Kennedy, D-Mass., and Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah.

The legislation received strong bipartisan support when Congress passed it late last month. It authorizes \$6 billion over the next five years to support volunteer-service programs. That money, if appropriated, would begin to

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flow in fiscal 2010 and be administered by the **Corporation for National and Community Service** through formula grants to states and competitive grants to organizations and schools.

### CEO Named

President Obama also announced yesterday his intention to nominate Maria Eitel, the president of the Nike Foundation and a vice president of Nike Inc., to serve as chief executive officer of the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Mr. Obama included \$1.1 billion in his 2010 budget proposal to finance the Serve America Act, a 25 percent increase over what was last authorized under the 1993 community-service legislation.

The law will create a new Education Corps for full-time volunteers to work in schools, modeled after AmeriCorps. But the other new education-related programs authorized by the measure will be administered by the Learn and Serve America arm of the Corporation for National and Community Service. Learn and Serve is expected to receive about \$50 million during the appropriations process for the coming fiscal year, up from the \$37 million it received this year, said Rachel Racusen, a spokeswoman for the House Education and Labor Committee.

One of the new programs, Summer of Service, will create opportunities for middle and high school youths to perform community service during the summer and earn a \$500 award they can use to pay for college tuition or loans if they volunteer for 100 hours or more. The law authorizes \$10 million per year for program support and \$10 million per year for education awards.

The legislation also authorizes \$20 million for Youth Engagement Zones. Partnerships of school and community organizations may apply for grants to engage secondary school students and out-of-school youths in community service. In addition, the legislation establishes a new program through which high school students can take part in service learning for at least 70 hours in a semester to address specific community challenges.

### Praise From Experts

Experts on service learning commended the Obama administration and Congress for expanding funding for programs that will give children and teenagers a chance to engage more deeply in their communities.

Jean Manney, a program associate for **Innovations in Civic Participation**, said she was "thrilled" that the Summer of Service idea had become part of federal legislation, something that her organization has promoted.

"We don't see it as just for a summer, but ideally students are involved before and after, and it's something they continue to do throughout the school year and for the rest of their lives," she said.

The Washington-based Innovations in Civic Participation is a clearinghouse on how organizations can set up summer service programs that are connected to academic learning, develop leadership skills in youths, and meet "real needs" in communities, according to Ms. Manney.

"It's an excellent move" for President Obama to expand federal support for service opportunities, said Jim Kielsmeier, the founder of the St. Paul, Minn.-based **National Youth Leadership Council**, which promotes service learning for children and teenagers. "It's important that he builds service learning into an overall national strategy."

### Educational Part Forgotten?

But Mr. Kielsmeier said he is concerned that implementation of the new law will not stress elements of true service learning, which include involving youths in designing service projects, connecting service to an academic-content area, and engaging students effectively in a community.

"I'm concerned that the education part of national service might get overwhelmed by the increase in full-time national service," he said.

Joseph E. Kahne, the dean of the school of education at Mills College, in Oakland, Calif., who has conducted national studies on service learning, also commended Mr. Obama in supporting increased service opportunities for

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young people. But he echoed Mr. Kielsmeier’s concerns that the focus of the Serve America Act is “more on community service than service learning.”

He said the Obama administration should ensure not only that children and youths become involved in service, but also that they increase their knowledge about the issues they are engaged in.

For example, he said, if children or teenagers volunteer to work with the elderly, they should increase their knowledge about the needs of older adults and different views about how those needs can be met. They might learn about how people from different cultures take care of the elderly, for instance.

In addition, Mr. Kahne said, it’s important for the administration to make sure that children and youths from families of all different income levels have a chance to engage in community service. Research shows, he said, that “kids in schools that are better off financially get many more service opportunities than those in less well-off communities.”

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**AndrewPass** wrote:

Local jurisdictions definitely have a responsibility to promote learning opportunities in addition to service opportunities. But, these learning opportunities/experiences are often best left to the local level. With regards to more affluent students having greater opportunities to engage in social action projects, it may be true, but it sure sounds silly. It would not be difficult for local schools, even those in the poorest areas to develop these kinds of opportunities.

<http://www.lesstotech.blogspot.com>

4/22/2009 10:31 AM EDT on EdWeek

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