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OFFICE OF LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR PAT QUINN

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Guest Opinion
By Lieutenant Governor Pat Quinn
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(1,010 words)

***“Si se puede”*: Cesar Chavez’ legacy of service**

In 1974, I had the honor of meeting the legendary labor and civil rights leader, Cesar Chavez. This slightly-built, quiet man with a huge heart was a giant of the 20th Century upon whose shoulders we all stand. A World War II Navy veteran, Chavez dedicated his life to improving the conditions of farm workers and battling for the rights of immigrants. He was ahead of his time in advocating for a clean environment and food safety.

A skilled labor organizer, Chavez founded the National Farm Workers Association in 1962, which later became the United Farm Workers Union (UFW). A student of Mahatma Gandhi, Chavez used a combination of tactics, including boycotts, strikes, fasts and creative direct confrontation. When he died in 1993, he was known around the globe for his successful grape, wine and lettuce boycotts.

His enduring motto of empowerment and hope was *“Si se puede”* or “Yes, we can!” He was convinced that every single person can make a difference in their community and in this world, a truly great legacy. That spirit lives on in the work of the young labor organizer fighting a union-busting company, or the immigrant struggling for the American Dream or the teacher who has faith in the potential of every student in the classroom.

Anyone who believes in social justice or the value of public service owes a debt to Cesar Chavez.

Sadly, many of today’s young people are uninterested in politics or current affairs. A recent UCLA study found that only 28 percent of incoming college freshmen keep up-to-date in current affairs (down from 60 percent in 1966). Another poll found that more than half of young people surveyed increasingly feel they cannot have an impact on their government. Only one of three 15- to 17-year olds not planning to attend college believe they can have an impact. And despite the unprecedented role the Internet and text messaging played in the recent Presidential race, citizens under age 25 still vote with much less frequency than older voters.

What can we do to instill a sense of civic responsibility in young people? One solution is the *Cesar Chavez Serve and Learn Project*, an exciting and effective way to get students from K-12 engaged in meaningful community improvement projects while learning about Chavez’ legacy.

Working in partnership with the Cesar E. Chavez Foundation, Illinois State Board of Education and Chicago Public Schools, my office has launched the *Cesar Chavez Serve and Learn Project* in 50 schools with more than 3,000 participating students. The mission of the project is to instill an ethic of service and civic responsibility in young people.

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The program is based on a teaching methodology called “service learning” that links public service to a school’s academic curriculum. By integrating involvement in a community service project with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, participating students retain the lessons learned while feeling a new stake in their neighborhood. A survey of Wisconsin teachers found that 98 percent of teachers felt their students learned more from this methodology than they would have without a service component. Further, middle- and high school students who participate in service learning programs increased their reading and math test scores, and were less likely to drop out.

In the *Cesar Chavez Serve and Learn Project*, teachers present standards-based lesson plans to aid students in appreciating the ideals and accomplishments of Chavez. Students are asked to assess the needs within their community and then design a service project that addresses those problems during the week of March 31 (Chavez’s birthday).

The lesson plans are flexible and enable the teacher to integrate the curriculum in multiple subject areas. For example, a social science teacher may focus on the conditions leading to the rise of the labor movement. A science class may examine the quality of water in a nearby river. Based on the lessons learned about Chavez’s life, the students are encouraged to construct their own service project or choose from several options.

In its first two years, several *Cesar Chavez Serve and Learn Project* success stories can be cited. At Chicago’s Curie High School, for example, art students created a colorful mural about the struggles of the United Farm Workers to educate the entire student body. At Park Ridge’s Lincoln School, students conducted a variety of community projects to help a food depository, aid tsunami victims and protect bird habitats.

And at Elgin High School, the students of Illinois Teacher of the Year Deborah Perryman launched a petition drive to re-name a street near the school “Cesar Chavez Drive”. While rebuffed by city officials, the mere act of organizing such an initiative was empowering, according to Perryman. *“Sometimes kids don’t think they can make a difference because some of our students are poor, because some students’ spoken language is not English, or because some are not A+ students... (Now they feel) it’s their right to make a difference in their community; that’s what Chavez did,”* Perryman told the *Daily Herald*.

Many high school districts now require some public service as a graduate requirement. The Chicago Public Schools, for example, now expect each student to do 40 hours of service between the 9th and 12th grades. By using Chavez’s unselfish vision and resourceful tactics as a guide, a whole generation of students who may never have known about Chavez can be inspired by him while contributing to the betterment of the community.

Cesar Chavez personified the greatness of the American labor movement. He was unrelenting in the face of injustice and always had time for everyday people. He believed in the power - even the duty - of each person to make a difference, and his affirmative declaration of *“Si se puede”* echoes with us today. Let us share that positive message with students across Illinois through the *Cesar Chavez Serve and Learn Project*.

On November 14-15, the Illinois Resource Center will provide training by the Cesar Chavez Foundation for all interested teachers. For more information, see www.ChavezServeandLearn.il.gov.

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