

STANDARDS of QUALITY
for
School-based Service-learning

from the
Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform

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What is Service-Learning?

Service-learning is a method by which young people learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully-organized service experiences...

- **That meet actual community needs.**
- **That are coordinated in collaboration with the school and community.**
- **That are integrated into each young person's academic curriculum.**
- **That provide structured time for a young person to think, talk, and write about what he/she did and saw during the actual service activity.**
- **That provide young people with opportunities to use newly acquired academic skills and knowledge in real life situations in their own communities.**
- **That enhance what is taught in the school by extending student learning beyond the classroom.**
- **That help to foster the development of a sense of caring for others.**

Standards

- I.** Effective service-learning efforts strengthen service and academic learning.
- II.** Model service-learning provides concrete opportunities for youth to learn new skills, to think critically, and to test new roles in an environment which encourages risk-taking and rewards competence.
- III.** Preparation and reflection are essential elements in service-learning.
- IV.** Students' efforts are recognized by their peers and the community they serve.
- V.** Youth are involved in the planning.
- VI.** The service students perform makes a meaningful contribution to the community.
- VII.** Effective service-learning integrates systematic formative and summative evaluation.
- VIII.** Service-learning connects school and its community in new and positive ways.
- IX.** Service-learning is understood and supported as an integral element in the life of a school and its community.
- X.** Skilled adult guidance and supervision is essential to the success of service-learning.
- XI.** Pre-service and staff development which includes the philosophy and methodology of service-learning best ensure that program quality and continuity are maintained.

Introduction

Community service is a powerful tool for youth development. It transforms the young person from a passive recipient to an active provider, and in so doing redefines the perception of youth in the community from a cause of problems to a source of solutions. When combined with formal education, service becomes a method of learning or "service-learning." Service-learning enables teachers to employ a variety of effective teaching strategies that emphasize student-centered, interactive, experiential education. Service-learning places curricular concepts in the context of real-life situations and empowers students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize these concepts through practical problem-solving, often in service to the community.

In setting forth standards of quality for school-based service-learning, we do not presume to provide a list of absolutes, nor even a complete inventory of the elements that contribute to high quality. Instead, what follows is designed to serve as a yardstick that can be used to measure the success

of a variety of approaches to service-learning, locally as well as nationally.

We are aware of the wide diversity among our schools, their students, and their communities, and have tried to enunciate criteria broad enough to be applied across varied regions and populations, yet concrete enough to be translated into action.

Service-learning connects young people to the community, placing them in challenging situations where they associate with adults and accumulate experiences that can strengthen traditional academic studies. Service-learning also makes classroom study relevant, as young people connect their actions in the world beyond the school's walls with work in math, social studies, language arts, and science.

Young people have few opportunities to be around adults outside of school and home. As described in "A Matter of Time," a report of the Task Force on Youth Development and Community Programs of the Carnegie Corporation (1992), too many children are raising each other with little stabilizing input from adults.

The isolation of young people has resulted in a rift between them and society's institutions. Service-learning involves youth in active roles in the community, and establishes a new relationship between young people and an adult facilitator; hence it can be a powerful force in closing that rift.

As they work together for a defined purpose, youth and adults will learn to respect each other. When mutual trust is established between adults and young people, meaningful dialogue, so often absent in the life of today's youth, can take place.

Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, service-learning and community service are not synonymous. Community service may be, and often is, a powerful experience for young people, but community service becomes service-learning when there is a deliberate connection made between service and learning opportunities which are then accompanied by conscious and thoughtfully-designed occasions for reflecting on the service experience.

Reflection may be described as the process of looking back on the implications of actions taken -- both good and bad -- determining what has been gained, lost, or achieved, and connecting these conclusions to future actions and larger societal contexts.

Effective service-learning responds to the needs of the community as well as to the developmental and learning needs of youth. The model should be modified to reflect the maturity and capacities of youth at different stages. Duration of the service role, type of service, desired outcomes, and the structure for reflection must all be designed to be age-appropriate. Service-learning is most effective when it combines community needs and students' interests, and is compatible with their skills and abilities.

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I. Effective service-learning efforts strengthen service and academic learning

Service-learning efforts should begin with clearly articulated learning goals, to be achieved through structured preparation and reflection -- discussion, writing, reading, observation -- and the service itself. Learning goals -- knowledge, skills, attitudes -- must be compatible with the developmental level of the young person.

The examples that follow demonstrate that service can be linked to academics in many ways, and at all levels. Even in the primary grades, when the youngest children are learning about their own neighborhood, they can engage in conservation or recycling projects. Children in elementary school might plan safe routes for the walk to and from school to develop mathematics, observation and map skills. In secondary school, adolescents can explore issues such as hunger through virtually every academic discipline: crop rotation and rainfall in science and geography, computing individual and collective nutritional needs in math class, the

economics of food distribution and efforts of governments to address these problems in social studies, and so on. Service at a food distribution center could reinforce all this learning by placing it in the context of community needs.



II. Model service-learning provides concrete opportunities for youth to learn new skills, to think critically, and to test new roles in an environment which encourages risk-taking and rewards competence

The experience of serving in the community, however laudable, is not an end in itself. By performing meaningful work, young people can develop and apply new skills, try on

different roles and plan -- constantly reinforcing connections between classroom learning and the real world.

In making the world their laboratory, service-learning has the potential to enable students to develop increased self-reliance in real settings. They learn to work cooperatively, and to relate to peers and adults in new and constructive ways. Their self-image improves in a legitimate way, not because of imagined good feelings but rather as a result of increased competence.

Students who work at a senior center learn about aging, the demographics of a community, its available social services, government policy, history, and human relations. Those who help supervise young children at a day care center learn about child development, parenting, and social policy. School students who develop a plan for school recycling and investigate local services develop an understanding of the promise of recycling as well as the problems it poses. In each circumstance, students learn to plan, to analyze problems, and to test out new and challenging roles.



III. Preparation and reflection are essential elements in service-learning

Two essential elements that give service-learning its educational integrity are preparation and reflection. Preparatory study of underlying problems, history, and policies enriches student learning, as do deliberate discussion, and other classroom activities. Preparation also should introduce the skills and attitudes needed for the service to be effective.

Reflection is the framework in which students process and synthesize the information and ideas they have gained through their service experience and in the classroom. Through the process of reflection, students analyze concepts, evaluate experiences, and form opinions -- all in the context of the school curricula.

Practicing reflection also assists young people to gain a greater sense of themselves. For example, when learners are asked to think about their own goals and progress in a service-learning experience, they have the opportunity to

master self-assessment skills which can help them to become more independent learners. They acquire insights which allow them to build on their strengths and to set goals in areas where they know they need further development. Reflection also offers teachers an opportunity to identify the knowledge students have gained through service. The methods used can assist students with portfolio development or other assessment techniques.



IV. Students' efforts are recognized by their peers and the community they serve

In large and small ways during the period of service as well as with a culminating event, students should share with the community and their peers what has been gained and given through service. Recognizing the work that children and

youth perform reinforces the significance of the enterprise and the worth of the young people.

In a society that values work and measures people's importance by the jobs that they do, young people, especially adolescents, are perceived as non-contributing members of the society. Credit for their achievements, affirmation of the skills they have mastered, and appreciation for the time they have devoted to the community should be acknowledged publicly.

This recognition can be done through the school, the school district, or in the community. For example, local newspapers can publicize the work done by youth, recognizing individual achievements while increasing awareness of learning through service.

Whether a culminating activity is a presentation about the service, a book of essays, pictures, a party, a picnic, or an outing, there are many forms that end-of-project recognition may take. Student creativity and energy should be utilized in the planning and execution of the event.



V. Youth are Involved in the planning

When young people are given the opportunity to work in after-school and senior centers, tutoring young children, or leading an effort to clean up a local stream, they are being entrusted with important work with the expectation that they have the ability to perform it. Building that trust is essential to the success of the effort. That is why it is critical to involve young people at the very beginning of the work. Moreover it provides teachers with important opportunities to encourage curiosity and to foster planning and analytical skills.

Instead of being told that they will be helping in the community, youth might be asked to determine the needs of the community in which they live. Even if it has been concluded that there are certain sites that are open to receiving young people, the youth might be polled to find out how they would like to participate. For example, if there is an interest among teachers in environmental issues, the student body might be interviewed by a core group of student information-gatherers to find out what concerns they have and

what ideas they have for addressing these concerns. Teachers and advisors then serve as facilitators who make the tasks realistic and doable, but the engine is driven by the youth, not by the adults.

Just as it is necessary to build consensus and support for any group effort in the adult world, it is also necessary to gain the support of young people in reaching out to the community.



VI. The service students perform contributes in a meaningful way to the community

(In this context, the school may be defined as the community.)

The service roles or projects that involve students in service-learning will differ widely, depending upon the age of the young people, the needs of the community, and the specific learning goals that have been determined. However, whatever the activity, the following features are shared by high quality approaches:

- The work must be *real*; it must fill a recognized need, whether in the school or in the outside community.
- The service activity must be developmentally appropriate. For example, a district-wide K-12 effort to refurbish a park could consist of the following projects: Younger primary students study plants, grow flowers from seeds, and plant them in the park. Older primary students research what types of birds live in the park's trees, and build bird houses or

feeding stations which they continue to maintain throughout the year. Intermediate-age students extend the school's recycling program to the park -- learning about and working with city agencies to institute it, decorating collection bins, and designing posters to increase community awareness. In health sciences, high school students design and build an exercise path; in art class they create a mural for park buildings; in social studies they survey the community to find out what members would like the park to be used for and report their findings to the appropriate government agency.

- A tangible or visible outcome or product results from the service and when possible demonstrate, the learning outcomes.

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VII. Effective service-learning integrates systematic formative and summative evaluation

All learning programs, especially relatively new ones, can benefit from systematic evaluation. While anecdotal evidence of a program's effectiveness is useful, more systematic methods for assessing the impacts of service-learning are needed, particularly since the field of service-learning is growing rapidly and demand for in-depth understanding of program models and approaches is high.

Such assessment includes detailed documentation of program components and processes; the outcomes identified by, and expected of, all participants (i.e. students, community members, schools); and the impact of the service-learning program on individual participants, schools, and community.

Assessment processes can vary in extent and complexity, depending on the nature of the questions asked and on available time and resources. For example, if one question is, "Do students' attitudes toward school change as a result of involvement in service-learning?" attitudinal

measures can be taken at various points, or indirect measures such as school attendance can be used.

A question like "How does service-learning affect civic responsibility?" would require measures which assess components of civic responsibility such as values, behaviors, and attitudes to be administered over an extended period of time. If the question is, "In what ways can the experiential learning pedagogics associated with service-learning help to bring about education reform?", then assessment methods need to focus on the relationship between experiential teaching techniques and their multiple effects on learning and development.

A major benefit of formative (on-going) assessment is program improvement. Ongoing data supplies necessary information regarding program design in relation to program purpose and pinpoints where modifications might be necessary or desirable.

Summative assessment also affects program development, and in addition provides aggregate information on the overall effectiveness of a particular program model. A combination of formative and summative assessment,

whether done on a small or large scale, helps to ensure that programs remain responsive to their purposes and participants.

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VIII. Service-learning connects school and its community in new and positive ways

Service-learning has the potential to reduce the barriers that often separate school and community. Students learn that they can move beyond their small circle of peers and take their place as contributing members of the community as they discover that learning occurs throughout the community in traditional and non-traditional settings -- libraries, public agencies, parks, hospitals, etc. Relations are enhanced as agencies, citizens, and local government officials find that their expertise and counsel is sought by the school. Through

service-learning, schools and communities become genuine partners in the education and development of youth.

Just as school administrators have an obligation to support the coordinated implementation of service-learning in the community, the community must be committed to supporting service-learning in the schools. Communities must recognize and respect the curricular goals strengthened in the schools by service-learning. Communities must work with the schools to ensure that students' service opportunities are structured to be consistent with learner outcomes.

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IX. Service-learning is understood and supported as an integral element in the life of a school and its community

In order for service-learning to be accepted and succeed in any setting, it must receive institutional support for its philosophy and its financial requirements. School-based service-learning needs the support of both district and building administrators. Too often, educators enthusiastic about service-learning are offered token support, largely in words of praise for the "wonderful work" that is being accomplished.

While spoken recognition is important, what is significant is the provision of the time that goes into exemplary service-learning. Teachers who implement service-learning, either as a discrete class, as a part of their subject area lessons, or with thematic or inter-disciplinary learning, must be supported with planning and implementation time as well as a reasonable budget for student incentives, expenses such as transportation, and other

outside resources that can be crucial to the success of the effort.

Outside the classroom, the development, implementation, and coordination of service projects in the community require a level of support that must extend beyond the efforts of any individual or group of teachers. Service-learning can enhance school-community partnerships, but to do so, it must be presented to the community in a manner that does not conflict with community interests.

To ensure the stability of these school-community partnerships, schools/districts implementing service-learning must provide continuing and visible oversight as well as coordination among community interests and classroom teachers.

Administrators should ensure that the climate of the school is open to service-learning. Even those who are not directly involved in service-learning should understand its significance.

Teachers and students must understand why some students have different schedules and may appear to be receiving special treatment as a result of doing service. The whole school community must be aware of the learning and service goals which enable students to pursue these goals.

Similarly, when there are placement sites, even those who do not have direct contact with students must understand and welcome the young people. Students' roles must be clearly articulated and their tasks carefully defined with the awareness of the administration and clients of the agency so that the work the youth perform is respected.

The learning and service goals must be clearly defined and understood by all involved.

Parents play a critical role in the service-learning equation. At the minimum, their permission must be obtained in order for the young people to serve.

But they must be brought into the process at an early enough stage so that they fully support the notion of service and the unique learning opportunities that service provides.

Communication of the benefits of service and its impact on attitude toward school, and the relationship between work

and service should be communicated so that support from the home is forthcoming. Service also provides a wide variety of options for parental involvement, as students learn about the community of which their parents are adult members.

Parents with busy schedules might offer ideas of resources or potential placement sites, and when appropriate share with the students how their work and volunteer experience affect the larger community.



X. Skilled adult guidance and supervision are essential to the success of service-learning

The case for service-learning is compelling, but the task is a complicated one to sustain. Teachers employing service-learning in their classrooms should have opportunities for professional development. They must be given the tools, the training, and the technical assistance necessary to implement meaningful service-learning experiences.

Issues of type of service, site selection, curriculum connections, reflection, recognition, tangible outcomes, and evaluation must be considered along with the ever-present concerns of insurance, liability, and logistics.

Learning takes place during the preparation and while serving and reflecting. Youth must be afforded supportive supervision at placement sites. Supervision at the site should extend beyond the basic elements of taking attendance and keeping track of hours worked.

With such rich opportunities for youth to grow, to learn about others, and to take on responsibility, a caring person must assume responsibility for overseeing youth activities and supporting these efforts.



XI. Pre-service training and staff development which include the philosophy and methodology of service-learning best ensure that program quality and continuity are maintained

If service-learning is to assume real importance in educating students for the 21st century, it must be incorporated into preservice and inservice training and staff development. It will be critically important, especially in this transitional period as service-learning begins to find a place in the educational process, to provide high quality training.

Many of the teaching strategies and behaviors essential to high quality in school-based service-learning are in sharp contrast to what has been taught in "methods" courses. It will not be enough to offer course work at educational institutions; potential teachers should engage in service-learning as part of their own training.

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Founding Members

The Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform

*These standards of quality for school-based service-learning were compiled for the Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform by the Standards Committee, the members of which are identified in the list which follows by an * after the appropriate name. Final editing, design, and production courtesy of SerVermont. May, 1993.*

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