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Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform

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Standards of Quality for School-Based Service-Learning

ALLIANCE FOR SERVICE LEARNING IN EDUCATION REFORM

Note: The following standards are excerpted from a document developed by the Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform. These standards are based on a combined knowledge of practice and expertise and are intended to evolve as the practice of high-quality, school-based service-learning grows.

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

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 may 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 schools 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* (1992), a report of the Task Force on Youth Development and Community Programs of the Carnegie Corporation, 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. Thus it can become a powerful force in closing that rift. As they work together for a defined purpose, young people and adults will learn to respect each other. When mutual trust is established between adults and young people, meaningful dialog, 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 is 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 will respond to the needs of the community and to the developmental and learning needs of young people. 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.

THE STANDARDS

Process

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.

II. *Model service-learning provides concrete opportunities for youth to learn new skills, think critically and 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, plan—constantly reinforcing connections between classroom learning and the real world.

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

The 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.

IV. *Students' efforts will be 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 will share with the community and their peers what has been gained and given through service. Recognizing the work that chil-

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

Participants

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 foster planning and analytical skills.

Outcomes and Benefits

VI. *The service students perform will make a meaningful contribution 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: (1) the work must be *real*; it must fill a recognized need, whether in the school or in the outside community; (2) the service activity must be developmentally appropriate; (3) a tangible or visible outcome or product results from the service and when possible demonstrates the learning outcomes.

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

All learning initiatives, especially relatively new ones, can benefit from systematic evaluation. While anecdotal evidence of a program's effectiveness is useful, more systematic methods for assessing a program's impact are needed, particularly since the field of service-learning is growing rapidly and demand for in-depth understanding of models and approaches is high. Such assessment includes detailed documentation of the model 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 the 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 assessed some 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 pedagogies associated with service-learning help to bring about education reform?" then assessment methods would need to focus on the relationship between experiential teaching techniques and their multiple effects on learning and development.

A major benefit of formative (ongoing) assessment is program improvement. Ongoing data can help supply necessary information regarding program design in relation to program purpose and can pinpoint where modifications might be necessary or desirable. Summative assessment also affects program development, but 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.

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.

Commitment and Capacity

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 must have the support of both district and building administration.

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

Effective service-learning requires the guidance and supervision of well-trained and knowledgeable adults (teachers, school leaders, and community members) to facilitate the student learning and development.

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

Higher education institution teacher preparation programs should include service-learning and potential teachers should engage in service-learning as part of their own training.

Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform is a national coalition comprised of organizations and individuals from the fields of education, youth development, and youth leadership that advocates through policy the integration of service-learning into K-12 education as method of instruction and educational philosophy. One of its priorities is high-quality practice through well-articulated standards. For more information about the Alliance, contact Barbara Gomez, One Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20001, (202) 336-7026.