



Toward Research-Based Standards for K-12 Service-Learning

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In K-12 settings across the United States and throughout the world, the practice of service-learning is growing. The public is becoming aware of service-learning and its value. Opinion polls (see references) show that parents, community members, and educators alike value the connection between schools and their communities, and the use of service as an enhancement to traditional instruction. Stakeholders also agree that schools have a strong academic and civic purpose, and for any practice to be sustained in schools, it must reach outcomes in these domains.

Service-learning has the potential for reaching these outcomes, and in many cases, succeeds. Too few educators within a school or community-based organization, however, understand and utilize the principles of effective practice for service-learning to achieve the desired cognitive and behavioral gains. For service-learning to continue its growth and become a core teaching method in U.S. education, institutionalized beyond its dedicated practitioners, key principles of effective practice must be implemented consistently. The principles must be based on

research that shows what works and, when adequate research is not available, on the professional wisdom of long-time effective practitioners. Further, in this age of accountability, it may be necessary to have standards in place that can serve as a way to assess and improve practice.

The service-learning field has a long history of self-examination. Dating back to a Wingspread Conference held in 1989 on the “Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service with Learning,” the collective wisdom of individuals and representatives of organizations has been

captured and distilled into documents including “Standards of Quality for School-Based and Community-Based Service-Learning,” as documented by the Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform in 1993.

In 1998, the National Youth Leadership Council collaborated with the National Service-Learning Cooperative and other lead practitioners to identify 11 “Essential Elements.” The list was refined in 1999, including rubrics and indicators for high-quality teacher practices rooted in relevant research. In 2004, this list of essential elements was revisited in light of recent research, and narrowed to 10. (There was consensus in the field that “celebration” is an aspect of reflection and thus need not stand alone.)

At the same time, a national team working on a practitioner certification program led by NYLC saw the importance of describing proficiency and developed rubrics of high quality. The 10 elements and accompanying

rubrics were presented to participants at the 2005 Wingspread Conference on Service-Learning Practice Excellence.

After that meeting, a committee to help facilitate the formation of national standards was created and further reviewed of the 10 elements. As a result of those meetings, the Essential Elements were again revisited and distilled. Recent research was reviewed in the context of standards-based reform, and practices that appeared to predict outcomes were discussed in detail. (Much of this research appears in “Unpacking What Works in Service-Learning,” found in this volume of *Growing to Greatness*.)

Certain elements were removed because they were definitional. For example, the “preparation” element was removed because it was considered a program component rather than an effective practice. Other elements, such as “duration,” were added because they were clearly supported by research.

The result of this effort was the identification of Principles of Effective Practice for K-12 Service-Learning. (See Figure 1.)

Moving Toward Setting Standards

The Eight Principles of Effective Practice for K-12 Service-Learning will be used as the starting point in a standards-setting process. This process will entail multiple steps.

Research Review. The research from the field of service-learning and the larger literature on what works for student academic engagement and learning, civic engagement and learning, socio-emotional learning, and related youth development fields will be reviewed and translated into a series of briefing papers related to the eight principles. (Portions of those papers are synthesized in the research review that appears on pages 18–28.)

Convening Lead Practitioners. A national panel of practitioners, policy-makers, and

Parents, community members, and educators alike value the connection between schools and their communities, and the use of service as an enhancement to traditional instruction.

FIGURE 1

Principles of Effective Practice for K-12 Service-Learning

1.	Curriculum Integration: embedding service-learning experiences in curricular goals and standards that drive student learning of concepts, content, and skills in academic disciplines and cocurricular settings.
2.	Reflection: facilitating continuous reflection before, during, and after the service experiences – using multiple, cognitively challenging methods to encourage critical and creative thinking that addresses learning objectives.
3.	Youth Voice: engaging the vision and leadership of young people as valued contributors to society by integrating their ideas into the selection, design, implementation, and evaluation of service-learning experiences.
4.	Diversity: fostering civil discourse and democratic values through the inclusion of diverse perspectives and experiences, and through a respect for all learners.
5.	Meaningful Service: applying problem-solving and critical thinking skills to community and civic needs in real-world environments.
6.	Process Monitoring: analyzing student reflections and assessment measures, in combination with project and partner evaluation data, for continuous review and improvement.
7.	Duration: ensuring that service and learning experiences are of sufficient intensity and duration (or are equal to one semester), so that all phases of planning, through project evaluation, are included.
8.	Reciprocal Partnerships: leveraging community assets and promoting collaborative communication and interaction among stakeholders.

researchers will convene to develop standards from the principles, complete with benchmarks and indicators based on the research review. Traditional standards-setting processes will be used. In an interactive fashion, the group will draft behavioral descriptions of exemplary practice and, if possible, define performance levels and operational descriptions of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that must be demonstrated at each level. The ultimate success of this part of the process will be determined by the clarity of the behavioral definitions, the veracity of the research base from which they are derived, and their ability to drive practice.

Feedback from Reactor Panels.

These draft standards will be reviewed by 10 panels of service-learning professionals, conducted in conjunction with Learn and Serve meetings and other existing venues. It is expected that the standards will be refined in terms of their clarity and their conceptual soundness, and even the degree to which each standard represents an essential practice. Standards-setting is a consensual

process and thus will be vetted in multiple venues. This iterative process allows differences to be resolved and distills areas of consensus and disagreement.

Synthesis. The convening committees will synthesize the feedback from the reactor panels and use the results to refine the standards and develop benchmarks.

Standards Dissemination. The approved standards will be disseminated through national conferences, professional development trainings, online coursework, and partnerships with teacher education programs nationwide.

Other Steps Toward Professionalizing Practice

Concurrent with this effort to codify the Principles of Effective Practice has been the development of an online service-learning certification program, piloted by NYLC in tandem with the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. The certification program integrates the Principles of Effective Practice within a guided study program to recognize exemplary practice. The pilot group completed its studies fall 2006. The model is under refinement, and two more cohorts will go through the process spring and fall 2007.

1989	1993	1998	2003	2005	2006	2006
Wingspread Conference on Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service and Learning held	Alliance for Service-Learning and Education Reform develops Standards of Service-Learning	Essential Elements of Service-Learning developed	National Youth Leadership Council develops a certification process for service-learning, and revises the Essential Elements	Wingspread Conference on Service-Learning Practice Excellence held	National Standards Development Committee proposes the Principles of Effective Practice for K-12 Service-Learning	NYLC pilots the Certificate of Practice Excellence with University of Wisconsin-River Falls

Conclusion

These steps will take a great deal of time and effort. The end result, though, will be better practice that leads to more robust outcomes for service-learning participants and a greater likelihood of sustaining the practice of service-learning for decades to come.

We invite you to join us in this development effort by volunteering to be on panels or to become a reactor. Once the standards are drafted, we hope that you will adopt them into your practice and help us by measuring and reporting the results. Together, practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers can make a difference and reach the goals of giving every student an opportunity to participate in service-learning and of helping every participant to gain maximum benefit from their participation.

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