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Standards and Indicators for Effective Service-Learning Practice

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In April 2008, the National Youth Leadership Council released the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice. These standards grew out of a need to update conventional wisdom about quality practice as reflected in the Essential Elements of Service-Learning. Recent research shows that while some of the Essential Elements predicted outcomes for service-learning participants, others did not. (See the fact sheets on this Web site for a review of some of the research on quality practice. More thorough research reviews may be found at www.nylc.org/standards [1].)

The process used to set the standards included gathering high-quality research studies in K-12 service-learning; summarizing studies from the broader field of education on related topics; convening experts to draft the initial set of standards and indicators; facilitating reactor panels across the United States with youth, teachers, school and community-based organization administrators, community members, service-learning organization members, and others to examine the standards and indicators in detail and “tune” them to ensure they were able to be implemented; and finalizing them by mapping them back onto the research to ensure alignment and changing the language for consistency.

The standards and indicators are listed here and a version with graphics can be downloaded from www.nylc.org/standards [1] or by clicking here: www.nylc.org/objects/publications/StandardsResearch.pdf [2]

At the end of each standard and indicator presentation, a short summary of supporting research is provided.

Meaningful service

Standard: Service-learning actively engages participants in meaningful and personally relevant service activities.

- Indicators:
 1. Service-learning experiences are appropriate to participant ages and developmental abilities.
 2. Service-learning addresses issues that are personally relevant to the participants.
 3. Service-learning provides participants with interesting and engaging service activities.
 4. Service-learning encourages participants to understand their service experiences in the context of the underlying societal issues being addressed.
 5. Service-learning leads to attainable and visible outcomes that are valued by those being served.

Sample supporting research: Furco (2002) found that the young people in his California study who had the strongest outcomes were those who engaged in meaningful service activities that challenged them, interested them, or gave them the highest levels of responsibility. When they were challenged to adopt “adult” roles, young people were more likely to want to prove that they could do the job well, both to others and to themselves. Outcomes were greatest when young people had more control over their service activities, felt a sense of efficacy, and were committed to the cause that their service activities addressed. Outcomes were also better when young people experienced positive relationships with each other, with teachers, and with community agency representatives. Billig, Root, and Jesse (2005) similarly showed that when students

perceived their service to be meaningful, they were more likely to be committed to the service-learning project, to acquire more knowledge and skills, and to develop both their own project ideas and a greater sense of efficacy. Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, and Hawkins (2004) found that outcomes were greatest when youth interacted with others, acquired new skills, and felt rewarded upon project completion. In a study of African American youth, Youniss, McLellan, Su, and Yates (1999) found that outcomes were highest when the service activity addressed meaningful problems within their own community.

Link to curriculum

Standard: Service-learning is intentionally used as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or content standards.

- Indicators:
 1. Service-learning has clearly articulated learning goals.
 2. Service-learning is explicitly aligned with the academic and/or programmatic curriculum.
 3. Service-learning helps participants learn how to transfer knowledge and skills from one setting to another.
 4. Service-learning that takes place in schools is formally recognized in school board policies and in student records.

Sample supporting research: Billig, Root, and Jesse (2005) found that linkage of service-learning to content standards or curricular objectives was among the strongest predictors of all academic outcomes. Ammon, Furco, Chi, & Middaugh (2002), in their study of California service-learning program, demonstrated that clarity of academic goals and activities, scope, and support through focused reflection were strongly predictive of student academic outcomes. Kirkham (2001) reported that nearly all of the teachers who connected service-learning to their curriculum reported that students who participated in service-learning mastered more knowledge and skills than they would have learned through regular instruction, and that their grades improved and absenteeism decreased. Billig and Brodersen (2007) found that students whose teachers aligned the service-learning experience with standards had higher scores on academic efficacy and engagement measures.

Reflection

Standard: Service-learning incorporates multiple challenging reflection activities that are ongoing and that prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself and one's relationship to society.

- Indicators:
 1. Service-learning reflection includes a variety of verbal, written, artistic, and nonverbal activities to demonstrate understanding and changes in participants' knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes.
 2. Service-learning reflection occurs before, during, and after the service experience.
 3. Service-learning reflection prompts participants to think deeply about complex community problems and alternative solutions.
 4. Service-learning reflection encourages participants to examine their preconceptions and assumptions in order to explore and understand their roles and responsibilities as citizens.
 5. Service-learning reflection encourages participants to examine a variety of social and civic issues related to their service-learning experience to understand connections to public policy and civic life.

Sample supporting research: In a study of high school students, Billig, Root, and Jesse (2005) reported that the more cognitive challenge within the reflection activities, the more likely students were to engage in and value school, feel more efficacious, and acquire more civic knowledge and more positive civic dispositions. Root and Billig (2008) found that that teachers with the strongest student civic and academic outcomes had

reflection activities that asked students to investigate social problems more deeply, more thoroughly consider potential causes and solutions to social problems, weigh alternatives, resolve conflicts among themselves, consider how to persuade others, and manage complex tasks. Eyler and Giles (1999) found that reflection activities helped students apply learning to real-life situations and acquire stronger problem-solving skills. Engaging in reflection also was related to increased openness to new ideas, the ability to see issues in a new way, and the ability to analyze issues systemically. Blyth, Saito, and Berkas (1997) showed that young people who did not engage in reflection within their service-learning projects generally had lower socially responsible attitude scores than those who did. Those youth who engaged in the greatest amount of reflection were the most engaged in school. Waterman (1993) reported that students who engaged in more reflection had stronger self-confidence and social responsibility than those who did not. Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996) found that engagement in critical reflection was associated with a greater likelihood to apply what they learned to understanding and solving social problems.

Diversity

Standard: Service-learning promotes understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants.

- Indicators:

1. Service-learning helps participants identify and analyze different points of view to gain understanding of multiple perspectives.
2. Service-learning helps participants develop interpersonal skills in conflict resolution and group decision-making.
3. Service-learning helps participants actively seek to understand and value the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of those offering and receiving service.
4. Service-learning encourages participants to recognize and overcome stereotypes.

Sample supporting research. Spring, Dietz, and Grimm (2006) found that youth from high-poverty communities were much less likely to volunteer than those from other backgrounds. When they did volunteer, the young people from high-poverty backgrounds tended to be motivated by the opportunity to acquire skills for work or school. As a result of their participation, these young people tended to have more positive civic dispositions and behaviors than their peers. Billig, Root, and Jesse (2005) demonstrated that diversity in service-learning programming was related to academic engagement, valuing school, enjoyment of subject matters, civic dispositions, and civic engagement. Simmons and Toole (2003), writing about the results of a diversity taskforce, reported a lack of consensus about the relationship between diversity and service-learning. Some service-learning practices led to reinforcing stereotypes and promoting the imbalance of power in the relationship between social groups. Simmons and Toole noted that a missionary ideology is less likely when service planning is based on an assets model, when participants directly address the issue of culture, and when reflection activities ask participants to think about the larger context of societal needs and cultural traditions of those being served and those providing the service. Hammond and Heredia (2002) showed that participation in service-learning helped individuals to become better “cultural brokers.” Service-learning was also found to have different meanings and challenges based on the racial or ethnic background of participants. Vang (2004–2005) found that service-learning is an unfamiliar concept in many cultures and that service activities need to be culturally sensitive. Keith (1997) noted that non-White students who participated in service-learning...

...tended to learn more when knowledge was presented in context (“field sensitive”), when the learning process was collaborative, when they could see the relationships between their efforts and accomplishments, and when they engaged in activities that allowed repeated experiences with success and therefore promoted patterns of internal attribution.... Relationships were also important. More learning occurred when teachers were perceived as caring. (p. 137)

LaPointe (2004) gave similar recommendations in research about Native American practices. Native

American tribes often have strong cultural traditions that promote service, but their beliefs may not be consistent with the beliefs currently driving service-learning in schools and out-of-school programs.

Youth voice

Standard: Service-learning provides youth with a strong voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating service-learning experiences with guidance from adults.

- Indicators:
 1. Service-learning engages youth in generating ideas during the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes.
 2. Service-learning involves youth in the decision-making process throughout the service-learning experiences.
 3. Service-learning involves youth and adults in creating an environment that supports trust and open expression of ideas.
 4. Service-learning promotes acquisition of knowledge and skills to enhance youth leadership and decision-making.
 5. Service-learning involves youth in evaluating the quality and effectiveness of the service-learning experience.

Sample supporting research: Hart (2007) found that student voice and autonomy were associated with higher academic engagement and achievement in the literacy-based service-learning projects in his study. Bradley et al. (2007) demonstrated that high school students who had more ownership over the development and presentation of their service-learning projects had higher increases in self-confidence, personal efficacy, interpersonal communication, and critical thinking skills. Billig, Root, and Jesse (2005) showed that youth who had voice in all phases of their service-learning projects had stronger academic and civic engagement. Blyth and colleagues (1997) reported that when youth had more opportunities to plan and work together, they experienced higher outcomes. Spring, Dietz, and Grimm (2006) found that when students had roles in planning projects, they were more likely to report being interested in engaging in more service and felt more efficacious. Morgan and Streb (2003) showed that young people engaged in service-learning who had greater opportunities to express themselves made greater gains in political knowledge, were less cynical about government, and had a greater desire to be politically active than others.

Partnerships

Standard: Service-learning partnerships are collaborative, mutually beneficial, and address community needs.

- Indicators:
 1. Service-learning involves a variety of partners, including youth, educators, families, community members, community-based organizations, and/or businesses.
 2. Service-learning partnerships are characterized by frequent and regular communication to keep all partners well-informed about activities and progress.
 3. Service-learning partners collaborate to establish a shared vision and set common goals to address community needs.
 4. Service-learning partners collaboratively develop and implement action plans to meet specified goals.
 5. Service-learning partners share knowledge and understanding of school and community assets and needs and view each other as valued resources.

Sample supporting research: Wade (1997) showed that strong service-learning partnerships yielded strong outcomes for teachers, youth, and community members in the form of skill and resource acquisition, meeting

genuine community needs, and widening partners' understanding of each other and community issues. Reciprocal partnerships were identified as critical success factors in institutionalizing service-learning practice by Ammon, Furco, Chi, and Middaugh (2002), Billig (2002b), and Bailis (2000). Bailis concluded that the most benefit would be derived in a partnership that was long-term, well-designed, and mutually beneficial, characterized by collaborative communication and interaction between the stakeholders and using efficient leveraging of community assets.

Progress monitoring

Standard: Service-learning engages participants in an ongoing process to assess the quality of implementation and progress toward meeting specified goals, and uses results for improvement and sustainability.

- Indicators:
 1. Service-learning participants collect evidence of progress toward meeting specific service goals and learning outcomes from multiple sources throughout the service-learning experience.
 2. Service-learning participants collect evidence of the quality of service-learning implementation from multiple sources throughout the service-learning experience.
 3. Service-learning participants use evidence to improve service-learning experiences.
 4. Service-learning participants communicate evidence of progress toward goals and outcomes with the broader community, including policymakers and education leaders, to deepen service-learning understanding and ensure that high quality practices are sustained.

Sample supporting research: Billig, Root, and Jesse (2005) reported that assessment and progress monitoring in service-learning were related to students' enjoyment of subject matters, civic knowledge, and efficacy. Greene and Diehm (1995) showed that progress monitoring of student work in the form of frequent written feedback on written reflections was associated with valuing education and personal investment in service. Shumer (1997) summarized the research on service-learning and concluded that reflection and feedback were necessary for helping service-learning practitioners to monitor the flow and direction of practice to ensure that goals were met.

Duration and intensity

Standard: Service-learning has sufficient duration and intensity to address community needs and meet specified outcomes.

- Indicators:
 1. Service-learning experiences include the processes of investigation of community needs, preparation for service, action, reflection, demonstration of learning and impacts, and celebration.
 2. Service-learning is conducted during concentrated blocks of time across a period of several weeks or months.
 3. Service-learning provides enough time to address identified community needs and achieve learning outcomes

Sample supporting research: A 1997 study by Eyler and Giles showed that more intense service-learning experiences provided participants with more opportunities to contribute to the community, more varied and challenging tasks, a greater sense of ownership over the project, more opportunities to form collegial relations with professionals, and more opportunities to apply academic content to real world situations. Each of these factors has been found in the literature to be associated with stronger academic and civic outcomes. Hours alone are not sufficient to determine quality, though, but rather the content of the experience and the teacher facilitation in addition to the hours is important (Blyth, Saito, & Berkas, 1997). Duration was related to multiple positive outcomes in the National Learn and Serve evaluation (Melchior & Orr, 1995), and Billig,

Root, and Jesse (2005) found that duration of at least one semester was significantly related to all civic outcomes and enjoyment of subject matters. Billig and Brodersen (2007) also showed that duration was positively related to students' valuing school, civic engagement, social responsibility, and locus of control. In addition, Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmeier, & Benson (2006) showed that duration had a positive impact on young people's commitment to learning.

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