

Best Practices

Elements of Effective School-Based Service Learning

Definition

Florida Learn & Serve awards encourage the use of school- and curricular-based service learning, a method by which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that

- Is conducted in and meets real needs of a community (schools may be defined as communities),
- Is integrated into and enhances the academic curricula of students,
- Provides structured time for students to reflect on their service experiences and demonstrate knowledge or skills they have gained, and
- Helps foster civic responsibility.

In service-learning projects, students practice the skills and behaviors they need to learn (i.e., that teachers want them to learn) through the service they do. The service is both a means and application of learning.

Elements

What distinguishes service learning from other service and volunteering? In a school context, the service is directly related to curricula. Activities are design to address and apply specific learning objectives, standards, and curriculum frameworks. Effective service-learning projects have the following elements:

<p>1. Preparation/Planning/Design</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs identification/assessment—those being served help define their needs & how to meet them. • Learning the context for the need(s) to be addressed. • Issue discussion and selection. • Examination of stakeholders, policies, and systems impacting the need(s) to be addressed. • Designing activities to meet identified needs. <p>Teachers assign students work/projects/tasks to learn about the context for the service the students will subsequently provide. The service that follows is derived from this new knowledge, involves student voice and design, but remains within the curricular framework the teacher has established.</p>	<p>2. Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research- and knowledge-based service activities. • Student leadership in conducting and leading project activities. • Activities are often fluid and evolve as the project progresses, original needs are addressed, and others are identified. • Students work collaboratively with service recipients and partners. • Application of multiple learning styles including individual work, teamwork, using technology, tactile/manual work, oral presentations, data collection, writing, construction, etc.
<p>3. Reflection is integrated into successful projects from beginning to end as students form and test opinions, project outcomes, measure results and impacts, discuss actions and reactions, and make improvements and future plans. It allows students to process and absorb what they have experienced and is critical to meaningful learning. Reflective</p>	<p>4. Demonstration is another application of service learning that involves students in educating others about the issues they are addressing. Demonstration takes various forms—many of which are actual service-learning projects in themselves—including the following:</p>

<p>activities include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journaling, • Projecting project impacts, • Discussion, • Conducting formative and summative evaluation, • Making project refinements, and • Conducting future planning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy campaigns • Putting on public forums/presentations • Performance on the service issues • Teaching others about the project and the issues behind it • Creating films, portfolios, books, web sites, publications, works of art, etc.
<p>5. Recognition/Celebration Throughout the project but especially at the end, students should be recognized for their efforts. In successful projects, all participants join together to reflect and to plan future efforts.</p>	
<p>6. Youth Empowerment An implicit or explicit component in the five elements above, youth empowerment and leadership enrich every aspect of service learning. The greater the voice students have in identifying needs and designing activities, the more motivated they will be about the project. Having to demonstrate to (i.e., teach) others about the needs and issues being addressed requires a higher assimilation of learning. Effective projects have students conduct much of the evaluation, saving teachers labor and making students responsible for determining whether or not their efforts were successful.</p>	
<p>7. Reciprocity Reciprocity (could also be defined loosely as collaboration) ensures that activities actually provide service that is necessary, exposes student to people different from themselves, provides different perspectives on the needs and service, and brings outside assistance, expertise, match, publicity, and coordination to service-learning projects. In effective projects, teachers and students design activities based on what they hear and learn from those in need and not based on preconceived notions.</p>	

When these elements are in place, the impacts of curriculum-based service learning go far beyond those of traditional community service and volunteering. Service learning combines academic and affective learning to engage students hands-on in the real world. This combination—not to mention the incentive to get out of class—is what makes service learning such a powerful tool, pedagogy, and strategy.