

**SECTION II
ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS
OF HIGH QUALITY
PRACTICE**



Understanding and Applying the Essential Elements¹

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Who are they for?

The Essential Elements are written to apply to the work of K-12 teachers using service-learning as a method of instruction and to the organizations where service-learning is being implemented. They may also be useful to administrators, parents, community-based organizations, foundations and teacher education programs interested in effective service-learning practice and the organizational support needed to sustain such practice.

What do they address?

The Essential Elements address the issue of deepening and broadening the quality of service-learning practice and organizational support. They are meant to help define what it looks like when people and the broader organization in which they work implement quality service-learning. They provide what James Toole calls a “professional development map,” whereby educators can locate the level of their current work and chart specific areas of progress that they would like to make. It is hoped that they will provoke self-assessment, reflection, and debate among practitioners as they make judgments about effective practice and the actual impact of their work.

How can they be used?

The elements might be used in a number of ways: 1) teachers and administrators can self-assess and reflect on their own practice; 2) teachers, administrators and other service-learning practitioners can use them as general guidelines in designing and carrying out service-learning work; 3) staff developers can use them to orient newcomers to the field; 4) teacher educators can use them to help orient new teachers to this method of instruction; and 5) administrators, foundations, parents and other groups can use them in order to make a general assessment of quality teaching in this area.

Understanding the Benchmarks

Each Essential Element is accompanied by a benchmark scale that ranges from 1 to 4. Level One is basically community service with an occasional element of service-learning. Level Two has some, but not all, of the Essential Elements of service-learning. Level Three meets the needed Essential Elements for service-learning. Level Four represents an exemplary and, in some cases, even idealistic level of practice. The benchmarks are meant to provide a scale for dialogue about where people are in the practice of a specific element.

It may be acceptable to be at Level Two on any particular scale given your progress in implementing service-learning or the lack of organizational support

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in a given school or district. The benchmarks should provide an opportunity for further insight and understanding into service-learning practice, but they are not meant for a mechanical application, which may not fit a particular situation. They are teaching and organizational benchmarks, not content benchmarks. (e.g. They describe successful teaching and not the specific skills and knowledge that students should know.)

The Wise Application of the Essential Elements

We want to help raise the quality of service-learning without standardizing teachers' work. Service-learning is successful partly because it is a flexible model of teaching that can be applied in a variety of settings for different purposes. The benchmarks are meant to be applied seriously but flexibly. For instance, student voice is a valued component because it provides opportunities for critical thinking and youth development. The amount of student voice in a single project, however, may vary depending on the particular project, the developmental stage of the youth, context, time, and learning outcomes. Skillful educators consciously mix and match service components in any one project to produce substantial learning and service outcomes. We strongly recommend that all individuals utilizing this document participate in a professional development workshop, which covers the theory and practice of service-learning.

Assumptions Underlying the Essential Elements

All elements have embedded within them a set of assumptions. The basic assumptions of these elements are the following:

1. Both service and learning outcomes are critical to the integrity of effective practice.
2. There is a link between service-learning pedagogy, as described in these Essential Elements, and significant student learning and personal development.
3. Service-learning can provide a wide variety of outcomes from academic goals to citizenship to work skills to personal development, but they will not happen automatically through mere service involvement. Program design must consciously address the intended outcomes.
4. A high quality and enduring service-learning program requires support through leadership, compatible structures, and adequate distribution of resources.

1. Taken from Essential Elements of Service-Learning, published by National Youth Leadership Council, 1999.

Essential Element Worksheets

These six include the three defining characteristics:

- Clear Learning objectives (Essential Element 1)
- Genuine Community Need (Essential Element 4)
- Systematic Reflection (Essential Element 10)

And three additional critical components:

- Youth Voice (Essential Element 6)
- Significant Service (Essential Element 4)
- Partnerships (Essential Element 8)

By focusing initially on these six elements and moving individual practice to reflect the highest level possible, effective practice will be strengthened. Then additional Elements can be addressed.

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Assessment and Planning¹

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Essential Element 1: Effective service-learning requires the application of concepts, content, and skills from the academic disciplines and actively involves students in their own learning.

Mark the indicator line below to show the approximate level of your project at this time:

	1	1.5	2	2.5	3	3.5	4
	Level I		Level II		Level III		Level IV 
1.2 Activities stimulate the acquisition and application of course concepts and skills.	The activities relate only incidentally to central class objectives or are an add-on to the regular course.		Some activities are designed to relate to central disciplinary content and students are asked to apply at least some core concepts and skills in the service work.		All activities directly relate to central objectives. Deep application of core concepts and skills is elicited by the service and reflection on it.		Level III, plus the service work stimulates the acquisition and use of a wider range of skills and concepts than are required for the course.

Current practices—How are you currently implementing this element?

Plan for improvement—How can you strengthen this element in your service-learning program?

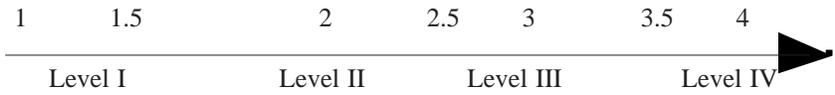
Support—What support do you need to implement this improvement plan?

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<p>1.3 High levels of thinking and the construction of knowledge are promoted.</p>	<p>Students are not asked or required to use more than lower level think skills to carry out the service project.</p>	<p>Students must access and interpret some new information and perspectives in order to carry out the service work.</p>	<p>Students are required to apply higher level thinking skills and more complex information to produce new meaning, understanding and solutions in order to complete their service work.</p>	<p>Level III, plus students apply higher order thinking to increasingly complex situations.</p>
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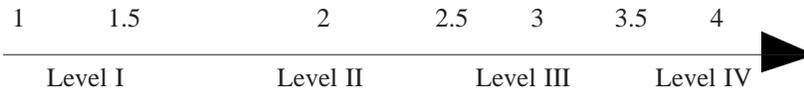
Current practices—How are you currently implementing this element?

Plan for improvement—How can you strengthen this element in your service-learning program?

Support—What support do you need to implement this improvement plan?

Essential Element 4: Students are engaged in service tasks that have clear goals, meet genuine needs in the school or community and have significant consequences for themselves and others.

Mark the indicator line below to show the approximate level of your project at this time:



	Level I	Level II	Level III	Level IV
4.2 Addresses a genuine need.	The identified need may be of a minor consequence or, even if significant, not understood to be so by all participants.	The identified need is of some importance to those who are involved as providers or recipients of service.	The identified need is genuine, is significant, and is recognized as important by both the students and community at large.	The identified need is of deep and urgent importance to the community (i.e., rebuilding after a natural disaster or working to solve a long-term community concern).

Current practice--How are you currently implementing this element?

Plan for improvement--How can you strengthen this element in your service-learning program?

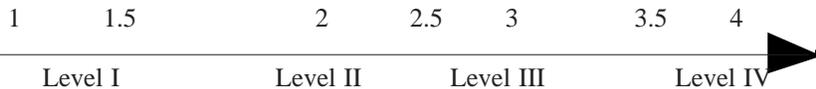
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Essential Element 4: Students are engaged in service tasks that have clear goals, meet genuine needs in the school or community and have significant consequences for themselves and others.

Mark the indicator line below to show the approximate level of your project at this time:



<p>4.3 Service tasks and their consequences are significant.</p>	<p>Students provide assistance with useful, but routine tasks that would otherwise be handled by the individual or agency being helped.</p>	<p>Students assist with tasks that provide unique assistance that requires special skills and/or knowledge and are central to the mission of the agency or life of individuals.</p>	<p>Level II, plus students perform tasks, which add new dimensions to previous efforts and provide assistance that most likely would not be provided without the help of the students.</p>	<p>Level III, plus student' s work toward providing a lasting solution to the community need being addressed.</p>
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Current practice--How are you currently implementing this element?

Plan for improvement--How can you strengthen this element in your service-learning program?

Support--What support do you need to implement this improvement plan?

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Essential Element 6: Effective service-learning includes student reflection as a central force in the fulfillment of curricular objectives and is done before, during, and after service using multiple methods that encourage critical thinking.

Mark the indicator line below to show the approximate level of your project at this time:

	1	1.5	2	2.5	3	3.5	4
	Level I		Level II		Level III		Level IV
6.1 Encourages student voice.	Students perform assigned tasks within a project designed and directed by the teacher.		Students make choices from options suggested by the teacher.		Students have significant voice in selecting, designing, implementing and evaluating the service-learning project.		Same as Level III, plus in some cases it is possible and appropriate for the service project(s) to be entirely student designed, directed and implemented with advice and assistance from the teacher and others available as needed.

Current practice--How are you currently implementing this element?

Plan for improvement--How can you strengthen this element in your service-learning program?

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Essential Element 8: Effective service-learning promotes communication and interaction with the community and encourages partnerships and collaborations.

Mark the indicator line below to show the approximate level of your project at this time:

	1	1.5	2	2.5	3	3.5	4
	Level I		Level II		Level III		Level IV
8.2 Contact with community resources or partners are cultivated.	There is only minimal contact between teacher, students and any service partners. The teacher sets up the project and the students implement it.		One or two individuals or representatives of community groups have interacted with the teacher and students to help set up and/or serve as consultants to the service project.		Ongoing partnerships have been established with one or more community groups to work on and fulfill the service and learning goals.		Individuals and community groups come to view the school as a regular community partner and resource. They understand that student learning and skills can be applied to help alleviate needs and solve community problems.

Current practice--How are you currently implementing this element?

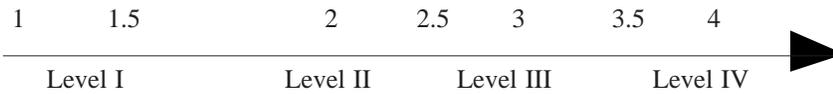
Plan for improvement--How can you strengthen this element in your service-learning program?

Support--What support do you need to implement this improvement plan?

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Essential Element 10: Effective service-learning includes student reflection as a central force in the fulfillment of curricular objectives and is done before, during, and after service using multiple methods that encourage critical thinking.

Mark the indicator line below to show the approximate level of your project at this time:



<p>10.1 Reflection occurs before, during and after service.</p>	<p>Reflection occurs occasionally, usually only at the conclusion of a service event.</p>	<p>Reflection occurs consistently after a service event, but only occasionally and sporadically before and during it.</p>	<p>Reflection occurs regularly before, during and after service as a critical feature of the total service-learning experience.</p>	<p>Same as Level III, plus students are developing their own insights and ideas as a result.</p>
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Current practice--How are you currently implementing this element?

Plan for improvement--How can you strengthen this element in your service-learning program?

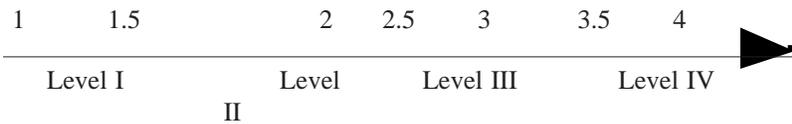
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Mark the indicator line below to show the approximate level of your project at this time:



10.2 Multiple methods of reflection are used.	One method is used to engage students in reflection (e.g., students keep a journal or do a final student project or have an exit interview with the teacher.)	Two or three methods are used to engage students in reflection.	The use of multiple methods and media (visual, oral, written, artistic) is encouraged within multiple groups (e.g., with individuals, small groups and whole class.)	Level III, plus students create their own structures, tools and guidelines for reflection.
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	Level I		Level II		Level III		Level IV
10.3 All participants engage in reflection.	Students reflect only individually (e.g., through a personal journal or by meeting individually with the teacher).		Students reflect with each other as well as individually.		Everyone involved in the service-learning experience is actively involved in reflection (e.g., students, teachers, adult volunteers, community members; those providing and those receiving service.)		Where appropriate, all groups are not only involved, but occasionally reflect together.

Current practices--How are you currently implementing this element?

Plan for improvement--How can you strengthen this element in your service-learning program?

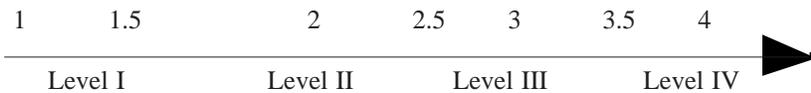
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<p>10.4 Students learn to use higher levels of critical thinking.</p>	<p>Students primarily reflect upon the “ what happened” of the service-learning experience.</p>	<p>Students begin to go past “ what happened” to be able to comprehend and analyze their experiences.</p>	<p>Students are able to acquire, evaluate and synthesize learning from their service experience and apply it to their own lives and to the broader community.</p>	<p>Same as Level III, plus students are able to apply learning to future projects and broader issues such as social responsibility, public policy and citizenship.</p>
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Current practices--How are you currently implementing this element?

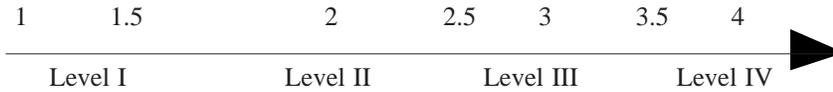
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10.5 Connections are made to curricular objectives.	Reflection exists separately from previously established curricular objectives.	Reflection is designed to provide a connection between the service project and a few of the given curricular objectives.	Reflection is at the heart of the curriculum, critically effecting both the choice of objectives and the means of meeting them.	Level III, plus reflection extends student learning into higher levels and depths that could not be predicted or required of students.
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