Why Problem-Solving?

Problem-solving is defined as "the process of finding solutions to difficult or complex issues" (Oxford English Dictionary). Applied to service-learning, this means inviting students to help decide how to best address community needs. Problem-solving often adds time to a service project, and sometimes does not influence the service completed. However, this approach provides important benefits to both the youth involved and the community served.

Problem-Solving...
- ✓ Increases knowledge and empathetic understanding of the community need
- ✓ Develops appreciation of community assets and opportunities
- ✓ Increases engagement and investment in the project
- ✓ Empowers new voices and ideas to help address the need
- ✓ Develops sense of agency and commitment to action
- ✓ Develops creativity and skills in leadership, decision-making, and project management
- ✓ Introduces social action and entrepreneurship

Essential Elements & Attitudes

Successful problem-solving efforts emphasize the following values.

Elements

1. Significant Time is Devoted to the Process
The more time spent researching the issue, the deeper understanding students will gain. This knowledge can empower students to develop insightful ideas that they really believe in.

2. Youth Lead the Project
Problem-solving provides many opportunities for youth to develop leadership and decision-making skills. Allowing students to take charge will enable them to take advantage of these opportunities while feeling ownership of the project.

3. The Community Plays a Significant Role in the Process
Effective solutions to social problems often result from collaborations involving community members. Students' projects can greatly benefit from the insights and experience of those already involved in the issue.

## Attitudes

1. Knowledge of the Issue
A complete understanding of the need in the context of current efforts empowers students to develop their own ideas and opinions to address it. Examine quantitative data, qualitative observations, and anecdotal experiences with the issue.

2. Recognition of Community Assets
At the core of developing effective approaches to community needs is empathy for the people experiencing them. Students should strive to become *catalysts* of change by leveraging local resources and recognizing the positive contributions of those involved in the issue.

3. Openness to New Ideas
Often, there are many effective approaches to addressing community needs. Keeping an open mind can encourage creative thinking and help develop more thoughtful opinions on the issue.

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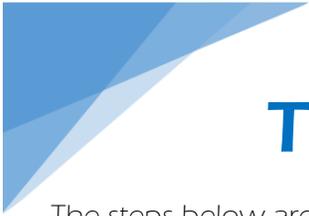
The Problem-Solving Process

The steps below are generally found in problem-solving projects. They do not need to be followed in order; the sequence may vary based on project set-up.

Define and Investigate the Problem

Students identify why their action is needed. What is the problem, where is it happening, and who does it involve? Students can draw on their own experiences and observations to investigate what they already know about the issue.

Research and Identify the Gap

Students perform research to gain a complete understanding of the issue and how it is already being addressed, using sources such as organizations' websites, conversations with those experiencing and/or addressing the issue, government websites, and news articles. Then, they identify "gaps," or enduring needs that are not fully met by current efforts.

Develop Solution Ideas

Students develop ideas for new relationships, services, actions, and/or technology that could fill the gap, based on their knowledge of community assets. Many of these ideas likely cannot be implemented by students themselves, but this process helps them develop their opinions on the issue.

Design the Service Project

Students apply their understanding of the issue and their solution ideas to develop a plan that fits the constraints of their project. If time is an issue, teachers may help plan the details of the project, but students will at least identify the action they want to take.

Implement and Evaluate the Project

Students carry out the project, keeping in mind their knowledge of the community. They then reflect on the project, considering what they learned, whether they met their goals, and how they could refine and continue their efforts.

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Problem-Solving Approaches

Pre-Service Workshops

Students participate in several workshops in which they define, research, and develop ideas to address an issue. They then choose a project, and (if time) develop a plan for implementation. Students should do both individual and group work during this process.

Great for: long-term projects, groups, grades K-12

2-Part Service Project

For the first part of the project, students research the issue and volunteer at a pre-selected organization that addresses it. Students then apply their insights to develop solution ideas, and from these choose their action for the second part.

Great for: long-term projects, complex issues, grades K-12

Personal Pursuit

Students complete the problem-solving process on their own, either with teacher guidance or through worksheets.

Great for: individual service programs or projects, grades 9-12

Short Intro Activity

The teacher prepares research for students on the issue that the service will address, and has them identify root causes and gaps in current efforts. Students develop solution ideas, but the project is teacher-planned.

Great for: brief projects, groups, grades 1-5

Academic Integration

Students apply knowledge from their studies to develop a complex understanding of the issue. They then develop thoughtful solution ideas and choose a project connected to the class' subject.

Great for: long-term and research-heavy projects, grades 9-12

Youth-Community Collaboration

First, a local organization is found that is willing to collaborate with students. Then, students complete the problem-solving process with the organization by observing its work, developing solution ideas, and finally collaborating with the organization on a service project.

Great for: long-term projects, complex issues, grades 6-12

Small Group Projects

Students go through the problem-solving process in small groups, each focusing on a different student-selected issue. Projects are developed and implemented by students under a teacher's guidance.

Great for: long-term projects, large groups, grades 6-12

Design Next Year's Project

Students research a community issue, then learn more through pre-planned service. Next, they develop solution ideas and design a project for next year's students. This can become a cycle, with each year improving on the last project.

Great for: planning projects in advance, K-12 students

Pre-Planned Structure

Teachers decide in advance what activity students will complete (e.g. volunteering at a local organization, running a food drive). Students complete the same process, but design a project that fits within these constraints.

Great for: brief projects, planning in advance, grades K-8

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