

# I.1 Learning Expeditions: Implementing Learning Expeditions Across the School

---

## Overview

In Expeditionary Learning schools learning expeditions are the primary way of organizing curriculum. The subject matter of a learning expedition is a compelling topic derived from content standards. Learning expeditions feature linked projects that require students to construct deep understandings and skills and to create products for real audiences. Learning expeditions support critical literacy, promote character development, create a sense of adventure, spark curiosity, and foster an ethic of service. They address central academic standards of content, skills, and presentation, and include goals related to character and community. They allow for and encourage the authentic integration of disciplines.

Teachers work together to ensure that learning expeditions align with local standards. A coherent sequence of learning expeditions is mapped vertically through the grade levels to ensure that expedition topics are not repeated and that students learn essential skills and knowledge.

While learning expeditions are the primary curricular structure in an Expeditionary Learning school, other curricular structures, programs, materials, projects, and lessons are also used when appropriate or required (e.g., commercial math programs). As much as possible, however, these other curricular structures incorporate essential elements of learning expeditions such as products, literacy, and service.

The elements of a learning expedition are addressed in different places throughout the Core Practice Benchmarks. These elements include: standards, compelling topics, guiding questions, character, literacy, student products, service, adventure, and assessment.

## **BENCHMARK 1:**

### **IMPLEMENTING LEARNING EXPEDITIONS ACROSS THE SCHOOL**

#### **A. Scope of Expeditions**

1. Most curriculum is taught in learning expeditions or through projects that have elements of expeditions.
2. All learning expeditions integrate skills such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, and research.
3. Expeditions integrate content areas when the integrity and standards of the disciplines can be preserved.
4. The schoolwide plan for learning expeditions includes expeditions that address diversity, equity, social justice, and multicultural issues.

#### **B. Standards, Alignment, and Mapping**

1. The school maps content and process standards across the grade levels and aligns those standards with learning expeditions and other curriculum structures.
2. Learning expeditions and standards are checked across grade levels to assure that expedition content is not repeated.
3. Local, state, and national standards are addressed through the content, the projects, the products, and the guiding questions.

#### **C. Quality Control**

1. The school has structures in place to review the quality of learning expeditions.
2. The school uses protocols for colleagues to critique each other's learning expeditions.

#### **D. Documentation**

1. The school has a system to document learning expedition plans, assessment tools, and student work across the grade levels.
2. All teachers document their work in planning and teaching learning expeditions (e.g., expedition plans, daily lessons, assessment tools, and student work).

## Learning Expeditions: Designing Compelling Topics and Guiding Questions

---

### Overview

The compelling topic articulates the content of the learning expedition, links the content to big ideas, and specifies the context in which that content will be studied. Developing a compelling topic is the first step in planning learning expeditions. The compelling topic is a cohesive package that includes in-depth investigations and one or more guiding questions that connect those investigations. In-depth investigations engage students in long-term study of one aspect of the compelling topic. Compelling expedition topics take content standards and shape and organize them to make them engaging and accessible to students. They motivate students to become experts, to generalize to big ideas, and to experience how depth leads to breadth.

## BENCHMARK 2:

### DESIGNING COMPELLING TOPICS AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

#### A. Choosing and Focusing the Topic

1. Specifying the context in which the content will be studied (e.g., a specific setting, event, place, or issue) focuses the topic.
2. The topic leads to in-depth investigations.
3. The topic often focuses on issues of diversity, equity, and social and environmental justice.
4. The topic often invites students to consider multiple perspectives (e.g., on gender, race, social class, or controversial scientific issues).
5. Community issues often focus the topic and require students to interview witnesses and experts and to create products that meet a real need.

#### B. In-Depth Investigations

1. Each in-depth investigation is a long-term study of an aspect of the topic.
2. In-depth investigations shape and organize content standards.
3. Big ideas, key concepts, and skills are articulated and explicitly taught within each in-depth investigation.
4. In-depth investigations lead students to become experts in a particular discipline.
5. The design of the investigation leads naturally to products, texts, fieldwork opportunities, resources, and experts.
6. Scaffolding for daily lessons flows from the design of the investigation (e.g., mini-lessons, workshops, skill instruction).

#### C. Guiding Questions

1. Guiding questions synthesize the big ideas, the theme, and the “so what” of the in-depth investigations.
2. Guiding questions connect the in-depth investigations.
3. Guiding questions are open-ended (i.e., do not have one right answer) and lead to multiple perspectives.

## Learning Expeditions: Designing Products and Linked Projects

---

### Overview

Products, the tangible results of in-depth investigations, are critical components of learning expeditions. Products are motivational, drive a need to know, and propel students to apply skills and understand learning expedition content and key concepts. They require students to develop craftsmanship and afford the opportunity for creativity in a particular medium or format. Teachers determine what students need to know and be able to do to create a specific product. They then plan backwards to develop a sequence of lessons leading to the product. In-depth investigations may include one or more linked projects; each project may result in a product. The linked projects and resulting products often culminate in an exhibition or performance.

## BENCHMARK 3:

### DESIGNING PRODUCTS AND LINKED PROJECTS

#### A. Product Design

1. Products are designed to motivate and to demonstrate student understanding of learning expedition content and skills.
2. Products require students to grapple with the learning expedition's big ideas and guiding questions.
3. Products are the result of in-depth investigations.
4. Product formats lead students to master the conventions of a particular medium.
5. Product formats (including technology-based formats) fit the purpose, audience, and mode of presentation of a project or investigation.
6. Teachers create clear product descriptions.
7. Literacy is intentionally woven into every stage of product development — reading and research to develop background knowledge, writing in a particular genre or format as the product itself, and/or other kinds of writing that explain or document the product.
8. Technology is used appropriately in various phases of product development — researching to build background knowledge, recording and analyzing data, documenting product development, and presentation.

#### B. Authentic Audiences

1. Products often meet an authentic need and have an audience and purpose beyond families or the classroom teacher.
2. Some products are particularly motivating because in themselves they are acts of service.

#### C. Linked Projects

1. Within a learning expedition, projects and investigations are logically linked and sequenced.
2. All projects and investigations within the learning expedition are chosen to develop deeper understanding of the compelling topic.

#### D. Planning Backwards

1. Products are scaffolded (e.g., skill instruction, mini-lessons, use of models and drafts) to build the understanding and skills needed to produce high quality work and to gain expertise in the chosen format.
2. Instruction is planned down to the daily lesson level; effective practices are used to teach the expedition content necessary for the products and to differentiate instruction.
3. Technology skills are integrated into daily lesson plans as needed.
4. Rubrics focus on standards and are created with students by analyzing exemplary product models and by generating criteria.
5. Students use rubrics to improve each successive draft and to inform peer critique.

#### E. Assessment

1. Each student's skills and knowledge are evident and assessable in the product and accompanying documents and presentation.
2. Teachers design products to meet standards and portfolio requirements.

## Learning Expeditions: Incorporating Fieldwork, Local Expertise, and Service Learning

---

### Overview

Students in Expeditionary Learning schools learn from fieldwork, experts, and service in addition to learning from text. They use the natural and social environments of their communities as sites for purposeful fieldwork and service connected to academic work. Students working in the field are active investigators using the research tools, techniques of inquiry, and standards of presentation used by professionals in the field. Schools develop procedures and protocols to ensure that fieldwork is safe and productive. In addition to having students conduct research outside the school, teachers bring experts from the community into the classroom. Older students participate in internships and apprenticeships that engage them in the real world and service learning. These experiences maximize students' motivation to learn.

## BENCHMARK 4:

### INCORPORATING FIELDWORK, LOCAL EXPERTISE, AND SERVICE LEARNING

#### A. Fieldwork in Learning Expeditions

1. Fieldwork is used to build curiosity and background knowledge.
2. Unlike the traditional field trip, fieldwork has a clear purpose that furthers the work of the learning expedition (e.g., students collect data, conduct interviews, or do structured observations).
3. In many cases, fieldwork takes place over an extended period of time with several visits to the same site.
4. Procedures and skills for fieldwork are taught before the event and data collected are analyzed and used back in the classroom.

#### B. Authenticity of Fieldwork

1. Fieldwork is modeled, as much as possible, on the authentic research of professionals in the field (e.g. zoologists, historians, anthropologists, newspaper reporters, artists, etc.).
2. Teachers select data collection tools to suit the purpose of the fieldwork (e.g. interviewing, mapping, sketching, sampling, and using observational protocols).
3. Data collected in the field are published or presented to real, external audiences.

#### C. Protocols for Safe Fieldwork

1. Fieldwork is structured so that it is safe.
2. The school has written policies and well-documented safety procedures for conducting fieldwork, which are followed by teachers and students.

#### D. Experts

1. Outside experts reflect the community as much as possible and include professionals and families.
2. Experts' work may include but goes beyond lecture and presentation to train students in professional skills and techniques used in the field.
3. Experts help students critique their work against professional standards.
4. Teachers and students maintain ongoing relationships with experts.

#### E. Service Learning in Learning Expeditions

1. Service learning is an integral part of many learning expeditions' investigations and products, and meets an authentic community need.
2. Each year, students participate in at least one learning expedition that includes service learning.



## Learning Expeditions: Producing and Presenting High Quality Student Work

---

### Overview

In Expeditionary Learning schools, students produce high quality work. Projects, papers, and presentations are not considered finished until they have met explicit criteria established by students and teachers. To do excellent work, students take their projects through multiple drafts and critique. Creating real work for real audiences motivates students to revise and to meet standards. In the process, they develop perseverance and realize they can do more than they thought they could. In portfolio presentations and public exhibitions, students articulate what they have learned and why it is important.

## BENCHMARK 5:

### PRODUCING AND PRESENTING HIGH QUALITY STUDENT WORK

#### A. Perseverance and Rigor

1. Project and product assignments are rigorous and demanding.
2. Teachers create a classroom climate with a high level of engagement and a sense of urgency about completing work.
3. Products and other student work require students to demonstrate perseverance and responsibility for learning as they work through multiple drafts to “get it right.”
4. Teachers support all students in producing high quality work by adapting projects, differentiating instruction, tutoring, and providing supplementary materials and additional time.

#### B. Craftsmanship

1. Student work demonstrates ownership and pride through attending to detail, making their work aesthetically pleasing, and meeting high standards.
2. As much as possible, students use professional tools and formats, and master the conventions of the medium.

#### C. Revision

1. Structured protocols require students to engage in the revision process.
2. Students produce multiple drafts and receive feedback on each successive draft.
3. Teachers facilitate revision by asking probing questions, conferring with students, building rubrics, creating mini-lessons, and modeling revision of their own work.

#### D. Presentations

1. The school organizes exhibitions to showcase student work.
2. Students make presentations to school and community stakeholders.
3. Student work is displayed in community locations as well as in the school.
4. During presentations all students articulate the content and skills they have learned and how their successive drafts have improved.
5. Students practice presentations using rubrics for content and presentation skills.

#### E. Portfolios

1. All students present their portfolios.
2. The school provides a variety of formats and audiences for portfolio presentations: student-led conferences, passage presentations, and presentations to formal and informal panels.
3. Teachers model and rehearse with students so that they are articulate and effective when presenting their portfolios.
4. Panelists for portfolio presentations are trained to use rubrics for content and presentation.