



AN INTRODUCTION TO THE
SERVICE LEARNING
PROGRAM OF DISTINCTION

**MIDDLE STATES ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS
COMMISSIONS ON ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

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INTRODUCTION TO THE MIDDLE STATES PROGRAMS OF DISTINCTION

Middle States *Programs of Distinction* recognize outstanding individual programs within MSA accredited and candidate schools and school systems. MSA offers schools and school systems the opportunity to assess the following areas of their curricula for excellence against internationally recognized Standards and Indicators of Quality in each field.

21st Century Skills
Early Childhood Education
Global Literacies
Music
Service Learning
School Counseling
STEM
Visual Arts
World Languages

If a school/system's program demonstrates that it meets the expectations of the Standards and Indicators of Quality at a consistently high level and exhibits the characteristics essential to serving as a high quality exemplar program for other schools, the *Program of Distinction* will be awarded. The expectations for earning recognition as a MSA *Program of Distinction* are very high. As such, a small percentage of programs will be determined eligible to receive the **award**.

Alternatively, schools and school systems can use the MSA *Program of Distinction* process as a tool for **program evaluation** that will yield comprehensive feedback for growth and improvement of the chosen area.

For **award or program evaluation**, the school/system will complete a rigorous self-assessment that is presented in a self-study report of the school/system's program. The self-study report is sent to MSA for review and if all is determined to be in order, a specialist visitor or visitors will be assigned to visit the school to validate the program's self-assessment and offer feedback. For schools/systems applying for an **award**, the specialist visitor(s) will make a recommendation to award or defer recognition of the program as a MSA *Program of Distinction*. For schools/systems engaging in **program evaluation**, a detailed feedback report including recommendations and resources will be provided to the school/system.

The specialist visits can be scheduled either in conjunction with a Team Visit for accreditation or reaccreditation, or independently at any time during the accreditation period.

Schools and school systems that have engaged in the MSA *Program of Distinction* evaluation process either for the purpose of seeking an award or for conducting a program evaluation have benefitted greatly from the actual experience as well as the outcome of the process. We encourage you to consider either of these approaches for realizing recognition and growth and improvement of your school or school system.

After review of this document, if you are interested in receiving the application for this *Program of Distinction*, please contact Audra Chin at achin@msa-cess.org.

WHAT IS THE SERVICE LEARNING PROGRAM OF DISTINCTION?

The Service Learning Program of Distinction is one of a series of Programs of Distinction designed by the Middle States Association Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools (MSA-CES) to recognize exemplary programs in various content and specialty areas. The Service Learning Program of Distinction recognizes schools that support broad-based inclusion of experiential learning through the application of higher order problem-solving skills to address real life concerns. For Schools/Systems granted the Service Learning Program of Distinction, classroom learning is enhanced through advocacy, either direct or indirect service to the community.

Historically, American schools have always had as part of their purpose the inculcation of civic values. Thomas Jefferson recognized that an understanding of democracy and citizenship was necessary for the continued success of the nation. Successful schools purposefully and thoughtfully plan the link of real life issues and concerns to academic skills throughout the curriculum with active participation projects. The widespread integration of service and learning allows students to continually apply their learning to the benefit of others.

While some schools may have an effective service learning project designed and led by an innovative teacher, applicants for the Service Learning Program of Distinction should be able to articulate how an established program is infused throughout the curriculum with projects appropriate for different ages and developmental levels. Eligible applicants will be able to demonstrate that a cross-curricular culture supports the adoption of this methodology as a means for students to learn both curricular objectives and civic values.

The Program of Distinction has been reviewed and endorsed by a number of educators practicing service learning in the field, as well as by leaders in the service learning movement who support programs in our nation's schools. The Service Learning Program of Distinction has "set the bar high" in the interest of recognizing and promoting successful language learning throughout the world. Programs achieving the Program of Distinction will serve as exemplary models for others to emulate as well as attain highly deserved recognition in the form of external validation.

Middle States member schools with quality programs at the elementary, middle, and/or secondary school levels are invited to apply for the Program of Distinction. Schools should not hesitate to apply even if they believe they have not yet achieved the described criterion. The self-study process and feedback from the Middle States visitors can serve as a valuable program evaluation tool and effective guide toward attaining the Program of Distinction in the future.

THE SERVICE LEARNING PROGRAM OF DISTINCTION CRITERION

The Criterion: The school supports a carefully planned, ongoing program that integrates service to the community into the academic curriculum. Regularly implemented projects engage students in meaningful activities designed to provide real life experiences for the skills, knowledge, and values found throughout the school's curriculum. Through a cycle of recognition of community need, action, reflection, and assessment, students are empowered to take educational risks. Civic responsibility and citizenship are goals of the program, along with the development of social, emotional, and cognitive learning and understanding. Critical thinking, problem solving, and collaborative skills are cornerstones of all projects. The service learning program effectively involves students as active participants in planning, implementing and evaluating projects that meet genuine needs of the community.

THE INDICATORS OF QUALITY

Vision of the Service Learning Program

- SL.1 The school ensures that the value and benefits of Service Learning are generally understood and accepted by the governance, staff, parents, and broader educational community
- SL.2 The school reflects a commitment to the integration of service within the curriculum rather than relying solely on extra-curricular activities to enhance the spirit of volunteerism and caring.
- SL.3 The school supports Service Learning as an accepted instructional methodology in all disciplines.
- SL.4 The integrated Service Learning program is broad-based, offering opportunities for students at different age and developmental levels to participate.
- SL.5 The school takes advantage of local partnerships to enhance the educational opportunities of its students.
- SL.6 Successes of the Service Learning program and its participants are celebrated publicly.
- SL.7 Approved projects meet recognized needs in the community.

School Climate and Organization

- SL.8 The school provides professional development opportunities that enable teachers to develop the skills and attitudes necessary to create effective Service Learning opportunities in their courses.
- SL.9 Facilitators of Service Learning projects are encouraged to participate in activities sponsored by professional organizations with a focus on Service Learning.
- SL.10 Implementation of service projects is observed, documented, and reviewed annually by the administration.
- SL.11 Written procedures are implemented to address any liability issues that may arise from working with students outside the school.
- SL.12 Student to teacher ratios are appropriate for the nature of the service projects.
- SL.13 The school supports Service Learning activities with flexibility of student and staff schedules for field trips or other group activities.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

- SL.14 The curricular objectives of Service Learning projects are clearly defined, approved by the governing body, and consistent with the philosophy and mission of the school.
- SL.15 Service tasks promote self-discovery and the acquisition and comprehension of civic values.
- SL.16 Service Learning activities encourage high levels of thinking and the construction of knowledge.
- SL.17 Structured time for students to reflect by thinking, discussing and/or writing about their service experience is designed into the program.
- SL.18 The curricular design of Service Learning activities promotes skills associated with teamwork through a cooperative rather than competitive approach.
- SL.19 Communication of ideas and information is an integral part of Service Learning projects.
- SL.20 Students play a role as planners and collaborators in determining actual community needs.

- SL.21 Students are provided opportunities to demonstrate leadership and responsibility through the coordination and implementation of service projects.
- SL.22 Students are equipped with the knowledge and skill needed for the tasks required of the service projects.
- SL.23 Assessment practices measure the attainment of the goals of the project for students and for the community.
- SL.24 Evaluations are conducted by external parties (other than student, teacher, or community participants) using best practice rubrics.
- SL.25 Opportunities for career exploration are built into the Service Learning program.

Resources

- SL.26 The school shows its commitment to Service Learning through the dedication of resources (financial, human, physical, time, etc.) that promote engaging and purposeful projects with meaningful results.
- SL.27 Each Service Learning project is accompanied by an appropriate and approved budget.
- SL.28 Transportation services meet the diverse needs of student participants for service projects within the community.
- SL.29 Substitute teachers are provided for facilitators during service activities.
- SL.30 Parents, family, and community partners are encouraged to become actively involved in supporting student Service Learning projects.

APPLYING FOR THE PROGRAM OF DISTINCTION

QUALIFICATIONS

The following qualifications must be met in order for a School/System to apply for the Program of Distinction:

- The School/System must be accredited by MSA-CESS or be a candidate for accreditation by MSA-CESS.
- If applying for the Program of Distinction independent of a current self-study and accreditation/reaccreditation process, the School/System must:
 - Be an accredited member of MSA-CESS;
 - Demonstrate that it meets all of the appropriate Standards for Accreditation at the time of its last evaluation; and/or
 - Provide evidence that it has addressed successfully all areas of the Standards identified for improvement through Stipulation or Accreditation Maintenance Reports.
- If applying for the Program of Distinction as a part of a current self-study and accreditation process in preparation for a Team Visit, the School/System will integrate the Program of Distinction application as an additional component of the self-study and Team Visit.

GUIDELINES

The following guidelines are offered to Schools/Systems wishing to apply for the Program of Distinction:

Schools/systems:

- Must be a candidate or accredited member in good standing of MSA-CESS or an Alliance partner.
- Must be willing to accept an on-site Team Visit to validate the Program of Distinction application. If the School/System is seeking the Program of Distinction as a part of a Team Visit or Mid-Term Review, the School/System must be willing to accept at least one additional team member to focus on the Program of Distinction Application.
- Must give MSA-CESS notice of its intention to apply for the Program of Distinction at least six months prior to the date of the expected evaluation visit.
- Must meet all of the Standards for Accreditation in order to be awarded the Program of Distinction.
- May seek the Program of Distinction at any time.
- May seek the Program of Distinction as a program evaluation for an additional fee.

If a School/System is receiving a Program of Distinction Visitor as a part of a Team Visit, the Program of Distinction Visitor will integrate his/her activities into the three and one-half-day schedule of the Team Visit. If a School/System is receiving a Program of Distinction Visitor as a part of a Mid-Term Review or independent of any other accreditation activities, the Program of Distinction Visitor(s) will develop a separate schedule of meetings specifically targeted on validation of the findings in the School/System’s Application for the Program of Distinction. This may require an additional day extension to the typical one-day Mid-Term Review.

The decisions that the Visitor will recommend are either to award the Program of Distinction or to deny awarding the Program of Distinction. When the awarding of the Program of Distinction is denied, schools/systems may reapply at a later date by submitting a new Application for the Program of Distinction.

ACTIVITY	DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION
Submission of the Program of Distinction Commitment Form	At least six months prior to the intended date of visit
Submission of the completed Application for the Program of Distinction	At least two months prior to the date of the intended visit

*Schools/Systems may also complete the application for the purpose of a program evaluation and not for seeking the Program of Distinction. Full details will follow in a separate section.

STEPS TO EARNING AND MAINTAINING THE PROGRAM OF DISTINCTION

- 1) The School/System contacts Audra Chin at achin@msa-cess.org expressing interest in applying for the Program of Distinction.
- 2) The MSA Staff Coordinator for the Program of Distinction will be informed and contact the school/system to discuss readiness and availability. The School/System will then be sent the Commitment Form and Application.
- 3) The School/System submits the Program of Distinction Commitment Form.
- 4) The School/System submits the Application for the Program of Distinction to MSA-CESS along with payment.
- 5) The MSA Staff Coordinator for the Program of Distinction evaluates the Application to determine how well it meets the Criterion and Indicators of Quality and the school/system’s readiness to host the Visitor. The staff coordinator will provide feedback to the school/system and a recommendation regarding whether or not a Visitor should be appointed at this time.
- 6) The Visitor(s) appointed by MSA to evaluate the School/System’s application have substantial educational, and/or administrative experience. The number of visitors will vary depending upon the comprehensiveness of the School/System’s initiatives in the Program of Distinction area, the size of School/System, etc.
- 7) Upon the completion of the visit, the Visitor submits the Report and a recommendation for award or denial of the Program of Distinction. Upon the receipt of the Visitor’s report, the Staff Coordinator develops an analysis of the Visitor’s report and makes a staff recommendation on the award of the Program of Distinction.

- 8) An MSA Accreditation Advisory Committee reviews the Visitor's report and the School/System's application and determines its recommendation on the award of the Program of Distinction. The Middle States Commissions' Membership and Accreditation Committees review the recommendations of staff and the accreditation advisory committee and make a recommendation to the full Commissions.
- 9) The Commissions make a final decision on the award of the Program of Distinction.
- 10) The school/system ensures that all future accreditation maintenance activities (e.g. Periodic Reviews, Mid-Term Reviews Visits, etc.) will examine progress on recommendations outlined in the school/system's Program of Distinction application and the Visitor's report.
- 11) The School/System may reapply for the Program of Distinction in any subsequent year.

The Middle States Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools meet twice a year (typically in April and October) to make accreditation decisions. It is at that time that decisions regarding the award of the Program of Distinction will be made although; the School/System will be informed of the recommendation of the Visitor prior to their departure.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Our school/system prefers to work extensively in a single area of need. Will this adversely affect our application?

Although typically, the areas of need addressed in service learning projects are developed in conjunction with the students, and therefore may vary from year to year and from course to course, teachers may find that an area of recognized need is applicable to many different curricular objectives and guide students toward research in that area. The nature of the community needs is not as important as the fact that the overall program exhibits diversity in terms of levels of projects and curricular areas.

Does a school/system with a service learning requirement qualify more easily for this Program of Distinction? If our state requires us to have this in place, do we need to complete the application?

While a number of member schools/systems may be able to qualify for the Program of Distinction, it is not automatically conferred. MSA believes strongly that any institution deserving of the Program of Distinction should first conduct an evaluation of the Criterion and Indicators that commonly define the MSA Service Learning Program of Distinction. Part of the value in seeking the Program of Distinction is the assurance it provides to the world community that the institution is examining its service learning program to identify its strengths and areas for improvement. Equally important is that the findings of the self-study have been validated by external reviewers. Finally, a key aspect of the application process is to identify action steps for future improvement. An "automatic qualification" would not ensure that this occurs. The fact that your School/System requires all graduates to complete a service project does not automatically qualify the School/System as a Program of Distinction. Remember, the Service Learning Program of Distinction recognizes schools that support broad-based inclusion of experiential learning through the application of higher order problem-solving skills to address real life concerns.

Our school/system has an extensive service component that students are expected to complete above and beyond normal class loads. Are we eligible for the Service Learning Program of Distinction?

Service Learning is defined by the Middle States Association specifically as an integration of academics and service, so programs that fail to make a link between volunteer work and course objectives are not defined as Service Learning programs. Extra-curricular volunteerism and community service, while worthwhile endeavors, often fail to make the connection between a student's academic curriculum and real-life experiences. In an effective service learning program, projects include a feature of reciprocity – the student doing the service and the person receiving

the service benefit equally by both giving and receiving. To that end, the evaluation of the project that addresses goals for both student learning and community needs is important.

Our school/system includes all Service Learning in one department (e.g. Theology). Are we eligible for the Service Learning Program of Distinction?

While a school/system could easily have a strong service learning program centered in a single department, the Program of Distinction is seeking to recognize those schools/systems that have adopted the methodology across the curriculum. Service Learning should be viewed as a cultural norm in multiple academic disciplines (core and elective). Civic values, like leadership, research, and communication skills, are not relegated to the responsibility of a single department. While one department may take the lead in fostering a strong program, the Program of Distinction is awarded to those schools/systems that show a wider based acceptance of Service Learning as an effective tool for teaching problem solving skills.

USING THE APPLICATION FOR A PROGRAM EVALUATION

The following guidelines are offered to schools/systems wishing to use the Program of Distinction **ONLY** as a Program Evaluation tool:

- Schools/Systems may seek the Program of Distinction as a program evaluation tool at any time.
- Schools/Systems seeking to use the Program of Distinction as a formal program evaluation tool must be willing to accept an onsite visit to validate the findings of the self-study. If the school/system is seeking the program evaluation as a part of a team visit or Mid-Term review, the School/System must be willing to accept at least one additional team member to focus on the components of the program.
- If a school is receiving a Visitor as a part of a team visit, the Visitor shall integrate his/her activities into the 3 and ½ day schedule of the team. If a school is receiving a Visitor as a part of a Mid-Term Review or independent of any other accreditation activities, the Visitor shall develop a separate schedule of meetings specifically targeted on validation of the findings in the school’s self-study of the program. This may require an additional day extension to the typical one-day Mid-Term Review.
- Schools must give MSA-CESS notice of its intention to apply for the Program Evaluation at least six months prior to the date of the expected evaluation visit.
- Schools seeking a Program Evaluation independent of any other MSA-CESS accreditation activities shall adhere to the following timelines:

ACTIVITY	DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION
Submission of the Program of Distinction/Evaluation Commitment Form	At least six months prior to the intended date of visit
Submission of the completed Application for the Program of Distinction/Evaluation	At least two months prior to the date of the intended visit

PREPARING FOR AND HOSTING THE VISITOR(S)

When the school/system’s application has been received and reviewed by the Middle States staff, a visitor(s) will be assigned, and the length of the visit will be determined based upon the size and scope of the school/system’s Service Learning Program and the type of visit. The visit may be arranged as a “stand alone” or in conjunction with

a regularly scheduled accreditation visit. The visitor(s) will contact the school/system to arrange the details. The purpose of the visit will be to validate the school/system's application, ascertain the quality of the program vis à vis the Criterion and Indicators of Quality, and make a recommendation to award or deny the Service Learning Program of Distinction. A schedule will be developed by the visitor(s) and Service Learning Program liaison that will include interviews, classroom observations, and review of materials and documents.

INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

The Service Learning Program of Distinction Visitor(s) will more than likely want to meet with the following individuals and groups:

- Board Member(s)
- Superintendent of Schools
- Director of Curriculum
- The Head(s) of School
- Director of the Service Learning Program
- Service Learning Steering Committee
- Facilitators of Service Learning Projects
- Guidance Counselors
- Students
- Parents
- Community members, representatives from partnerships, consultants and other stakeholders as appropriate

CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

Observations should be arranged so that the Visitor(s) see as many of the program's levels and languages as possible in the time allotted. If a district is applying for more than one school, all schools being considered will be visited.

MATERIALS AND DOCUMENTS FOR REVIEW

It is recommended that the school/system have available a variety of evidence in support of its self-study and application for the Service Learning Program of Distinction. Online documents and electronic versions including CDs and videos are welcome. The suggestions below offer a wide range of evidence that the school/system could provide for the Visitor(s)' review during the visit:

- Curriculum guides and/or course outlines showing the use of Service Learning
- Program of Study (course offerings and descriptions)
- Sample units and/or lesson plans if not included in curriculum guides
- Samples of authentic instructional/assessment materials
- Assessment tools
- Student performance results and samples (including student reflection pieces)
- Documentation of partnerships with community organizations
- Documentation of field trips the school/system offers to support Service Learning
- Documentation of co-curricular activities and events that celebrate and promote service activities
- Documentation of the communication of the goals, value and benefits of Service Learning within the school/system, to parents and to the community
- Policies that show how the school/system promotes Service Learning
- Budget demonstrating resource allocations to the Service Learning Program

- Goals of the program and any short and/or long range plans that have been developed or are currently being developed to attain them
- Documentation of recognition, grants and/or scholarships the program, staff and/or students have been awarded in Service Learning

FEEDBACK FROM THE VISITORS

At the conclusion of the visit, the Visitor(s) will meet with the Head of School or other key personnel as appropriate to offer feedback on the interviews, classroom observations, and review of materials and documents. A report of the visit that includes the Visitor(s)' recommendation to award or deny the Service Learning Program of Distinction will be forwarded to the Head of School within two months. The Service Learning Program of Distinction will be officially conferred after review of the report and approval of the recommendation by the MSA Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools.