

Benchmarking Best Practices in Environmental Education

PURPOSE OF THIS TOOL

The purpose of this benchmarking tool is to help organizational leaders and staff assess and reflect on their practices relative to standards of excellence in environmental education (EE).

HOW THIS TOOL WAS DEVELOPED

Drawing on a wide range of resources—research in the field of EE, input from a Bay Area EE Evaluation Collaborative, and feedback from participants in the Environmental Solutions Forum—Learning for Action and the Center for Venture Philanthropy assembled the standards of excellence found in this benchmarking tool.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

This tool describes standards of excellence for a broad range of environmental education program types. As you read through the descriptions, reflect on where your organization fits in relation to the standards described (check the appropriate box). Then, use the space in the right-hand column to provide evidence through short bullet points, describing how your program meets the standard or areas where your program could develop to more closely meet the standard. If you do not feel a particular standard applies to any of your programs, please check “not applicable” and provide a brief justification for decision in the space provided.



Learning for Action enhances the impact and sustainability of social sector organizations through highly customized research, strategy development, and evaluation services.

Environmental Programs for Children and Youth: School-Based and On-Site Services

Programs that are offered on school grounds or at facilities operated by the nonprofit organization for school-aged youth.

	Standard of Excellence	Evidence that Organization Meets Standards/Areas for Development
<p>Learner-Centered</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The program includes experiential learning, develops inquiry and evokes students' empathy for the natural environment. 2) The curriculum is (a) age appropriate, (b) aligned with state content standards, and (c) tailored to various cultures and learning styles of participants. 3) Teachers see substantive impact on student learning of content covered in education standards and assessments. 	
<p>Links Learning to Behavior Change</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Students demonstrate understanding of connections between personal behavior and the surrounding environment; they develop a sense of their own ability to make change and the intent to make a difference in protecting nature. 2) When appropriate, there are immediate next steps or action-plans. 	
<p>Depth and Reinforcement</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) There are opportunities for multiple, integrated EE experiences, through repeat organizational visits, pre/post enrichment of single visits, and/or linkage to other environmental education programs serving the same population. EE sessions sequentially build on each other; synergies across programs are captured. 2) There are pre- and post-program opportunities and materials for students and teachers. Teachers are given additional resources and/or support for how to locate and access materials for integration into their curriculum. 	

Environmental Programs for Children and Youth: School-Based and On-Site Services

Programs that are offered on school grounds or at facilities operated by the nonprofit organization for school-aged youth.

	Standard of Excellence	Evidence that Organization Meets Standards/Areas for Development
<p>Strategies and Continuous Improvement</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>	<p>There is a formal continuous improvement process that follows up with teachers to (a) assess impact, (b) measure effectiveness of all program components, and (c) modify the program as necessary to model good environmental education.</p>	
<p>Teacher Focused</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>	<p>1) Feedback from teachers is used to develop practical enrichment materials and activities that are time-appropriate and simple to implement in their curriculum.</p> <p>2) Teachers recognize organization as a model for providing support and resources for environmental education.</p>	

Environmental Programs Designed to Affect Policy Change

Programs that inform and influence policy makers, voters, and/or community members to take specific action.

	Standard of Excellence	Evidence that Organization Meets Standards/Areas for Development
Constituency Mobilization <input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Organization has a clear strategy (supported by a strategic plan) for how to develop and mobilize its constituencies to achieve a desired outcome. 2) Multiple tools are used to assess impact of mobilization outreach and to collect feedback. Feedback is systematically used to develop and refine mobilization strategy. 	
Strategic Alliances <input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Organization actively develops and utilizes strategic alliances to identify points of leverage, define policy change goals and achieve desired outcomes. 2) Others in the field look to the organization as a key supporter of new projects. 	
Influence <input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Organizational leaders have substantial influence with key decision makers, policy makers and decision-making bodies. When issues arise, policy makers contact the organization for guidance and assistance. 2) (Where appropriate, organization has strong relationships with a variety of media outlets. 	
Uses information for reflection; Driven by results. <input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Organization uses a range of resources to assess current policy environment and determine opportunities for action. Able to quickly respond and adapt to new opportunities. 2) Organization continually assesses the efficacy of strategies based on short and long terms goals for what is most "winnable" in a moment and time. 	

Environmental Programs Designed to Engage Volunteers in Environmental Action

Programs that enroll and involve volunteers in carrying out the work of the organization.

	Standard of Excellence	Evidence that Organization Meets Standards/Areas for Development
Depth of Volunteer Engagement <input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Volunteers are provided with multiple avenues for long-term involvement. 2) Volunteer opportunities are clearly linked to other programs within the organization. 3) The organization actively promotes opportunities for volunteer action within the environmental field (either within, or outside organization). 	
Learner Centered <input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Programs are intentionally designed to match the needs of target volunteer population(s) (age, skill level background, interest). 2) Organization provides continuing education about the context and purpose of the volunteer work and how it relates to volunteers' daily lives. 3) Volunteers recognize and appreciate the broader context of their work. 	
Community Relevance <input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Volunteer programs are a model of community engagement, with volunteers participating in opportunities directly related to the needs of the local environment and the surrounding community. 2) Volunteers are aware of the impact they are making on the local environment and in their surrounding community. 	
Diversity of Volunteers <input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The volunteer base reflects the diversity of the community in which work is performed—opportunities are tailored to meet the needs of this population. 2) Organization is recognized for its success in attracting volunteers from diverse perspectives. 	

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	Standard of Excellence	Evidence that Organization Meets Standards/Areas for Development
<p>Uses information for reflection; Driven by results.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>	<p>1) Community impact and feedback from volunteers are used to assess programs and inform future program design. 2) Volunteer program is seen as a model of success within the field.</p>	

Environmental Programs Designed to Change Business Practices

Programs whose participants and audience include individuals and organizations in the private sector.

	Standard of Excellence	Evidence that Organization Meets Standards/Areas for Development
Systemic Approach <input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Consistently applies a systemic approach to (a) analyze industry, environmental and policy factors that influence a “harmful” business practice, (b) identify optimal leverage points for change and (c) set realistic yet demanding goals. 2) Strategic alliances with other organizations enhance the broad view of the system and identification of opportunities, and there is substantive evidence of synergies building across organizations and programs. 	
Business Centered <input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Actively seeks market-based incentives to encourage environmental solutions for businesses. 2) Defines and develops points of entry in an industry or business unit; where appropriate, there is evidence of effective mechanisms for engaging business in a dialog and discovery process that leads to pro-business/pro-environment practices. 	
Uses Information for Continuous Improvement <input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable	<p>The organization involves a network of experts that includes business/industry leaders, scientists, policy and environmental leaders, in (a) ongoing learning and evaluation of conditions for success (b) reflection on progress towards specific goals, and (c) modification of strategies and/or programs to affect timely change.</p>	

Environmental Programs Designed to Change Business Practices

Programs whose participants and audience include individuals and organizations in the private sector.

	Standard of Excellence	Evidence that Organization Meets Standards/Areas for Development
<p>Driven by Relevance and Results</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Meets Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Approaching Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Does not Meet Standards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Tracks results in terms of short-term “wins” linked to carefully developed strategies and long-term outcomes. 2) Programs and strategies address current and pressing issues in a consistent, doggedly determined way, and yet there is demonstrated agility in matching limited resources to windows of opportunity. 3) The organization has been recognized for success in positively affecting business and industry practices and serves as a model for others within the field. 	