

CREATING ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Essential Questions develop foundational understandings. They provide the fundamental organizing principles that bound an inquiry and guide the development of meaningful, authentic tasks.

Essential questions have several key components:

- They arise from people's attempts, throughout human history, to learn more about the world(s) we live in. Essential questions probably intrigued the ancients as much as they puzzle people living today.
- Essential questions are so compelling that people have raised them in many different ways. Essential questions invite perspective to be brought to bear in order to develop deep understanding. For example, the question "What is light?" has scientific, mathematical, aesthetic, literary and spiritual dimensions.
- Attempts to answer essential questions allow people to explore the connection between their personal, individual, unique experience of the world and its exterior, objective, held-in-common dimensions. In exploring essential questions together, people are able to find expression for their own strongest gifts and interests at the same time that they are able to establish a sense of community with others.
- Essential questions allow us to explore what knowledge is, how it came to be, and how it has changed through human history.
- An essential question is always poised at the boundary of the known and the unknown. While permitting fruitful exploration of what others before us have learned and discovered, attempts to answer an essential question open up mysteries that successively reveal themselves the more we come to "know".
- An essential question reaches beyond itself. It is embedded in ideals of freedom, strength and possibility that permit people to come-to-know without becoming trapped in constructs that are oppressive or no longer useful. Essential questions arise from an implicit commitment to human efficacy: to a belief that individuals can make a difference, that knowledge can both be acquired and changed.
- An essential question engages the imagination in significant ways. People can know only a limited amount about the world through direct experience. We are most intrigued, puzzled and enchanted by experience that comes to us imaginatively. Without imagination, we could not ask the questions that drive science forward. We would have no art, no stories, no mathematics, no philosophy. Moreover, it is questions that spark the imagination that permit young and old to journey together into unknown realms. Imagination knows no bounds, no restrictions; nor do the questions we pose when we cultivate our powers of imagination. An essential question that arises from imaginative engagement is an important way to bring teacher, student and subject matter together in ways that enrich all three.