**Definition: *Essential Questions:***

These are questions that touch our hearts and souls. They are central to our lives. They help to define what it means to be human. Most of the important thought we will conduct during our lives will center on such essential questions. Essential questions usually probe the deep and often confounding issues confronting us. They pass the test of “So what?” They focus on matters of import. Essential questions provide the impetus for investigations and research.

**What are the traits of an essential question?**

 Have no simple “right” answer; they are meant to be argued.

 Are designed to provoke and sustain student inquiry, while focusing learning and final

performances.

 Often address the conceptual or philosophical foundations of a discipline.

 Raise other important questions.

 Naturally and appropriately recur.

 Stimulate vital, ongoing rethinking of big ideas, assumptions, and prior lessons.

**Examples of Overarching Essential Questions:**

Arithmetic/Math

 What is a number? Why do we have numbers? What if we didn’t have numbers?

 What are the limits of mathematics representations and modeling?

Arts

 Where do artists get their ideas?

 How does art reflect, as well as shape culture?

Foreign Language

 What can we learn about our own language and culture from studying another?

 What distinguishes a fluent foreigner from a native speaker?

Geography

 What makes places unique and different?

 How does where we live influence how we live?

Government

 Who should decide?

 How should we balance the rights of individuals with the common good?

Health

 What is healthful living?

 How can a diet be healthy for one person and not another?

History

 Whose story is it? Is history the story told by the winners?

 What can we learn from the past?

Literature

 What makes a great book?

 Can fiction reveal truths? Should a story teach you something?

Music

 How are sounds and silence organized in various musical forms?

 What role does music play in the world?

Science

 To what extent are science and common sense related?

 How are “form” and “function” related in biology?

Technology

 In what ways can technology enhance (or hinder) expression and communication?

 What are the pros and cons of technological progress?

Writing

 How do effective writers hook and hold their readers?

 Why write?

(http://questioning.org/mar05/essential.html, Understanding by Design Professional Workbook,

McTighe and Wiggins. 2004.)