

A Parent Guide to Project Based Learning



CraftED

Developing Deeper Learning Together

Examples of PBL:

PRIMARY GRADES Hopes for Habitats

Students learn about a variety of local habitats through research and field work. Through this project, students cover science, reading, and writing. Students create labeled diagrams on iPads, infographics, and ultimately informational placards to be placed in a local lagoon.

UPPER ELEMENTARY GRADES Track Your Trash

Students learn about human impact as it relates to recycling and composting. Through this project, students cover science, reading, writing, and math. Students engage in research (both on iPads and "in the field"), create process flow charts of scientific concepts, and ultimately create a proposal to their school board for the creation of a recycling and composting program.

MIDDLE SCHOOL Honoring Our Stories

Students learn about stories of heroes, both in history, literature, and in their community. Through this project, students cover social studies, reading, and writing. As a final product, students write memoirs of people in their community that adhere to their definition of a hero and perform a tribute for them at a community event.

HIGH SCHOOL A Safer Driving Community

Students learn about physics concepts such as Newton's Law, impact, and reaction time. These concepts are applied to the context of driver safety. Students conduct research on issues related to teenage driver safety and create a Public Service Announcement that is broadcast on the school news channel, using concepts from science to explain the impact of driver safety.

What is PBL?

Project Based Learning is an approach to teaching and learning that can occur in any school setting (public, charter, private, etc.) and at any grade level (pre-K through higher education). PBL typically includes the following:

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Teacher designed learning experiences related to grade-level standards

A real-world connection to classroom learning, such as community issues with local audiences

Hands-on and active learning activities

Student engagement, as result of the integration of student interests

A final product that students are working toward throughout an entire unit

A focus on 21st century skills (such as collaboration or oral communication)

Incorporation of a variety of content areas

Assessments throughout the project with feedback and reflection

Why PBL?

Project Based Learning has been around for over a century, but it has recently gained a great deal of interest due to newer standards that allow teacher flexibility to design learning experiences that have real-world application. PBL increases student engagement, motivation, and therefore achievement, as well as better prepares students with skills to succeed in the ever-evolving workforce.

How PBL is Different

PBL is different from the traditional approach to teaching and learning in the following ways:

1 The role of the teacher shifts to a **facilitator** of learning. In PBL, lessons are not traditional in nature. Although a teacher may “stand and deliver” a lecture or a small lesson here and there, they are more commonly **orchestrating** the execution of their well-thought out plans for student discovery during the actual class time with students.

2 Because students are often exploring “real-time” issues, the teacher and student often **learn together**. In this same vein, textbooks are rare in PBL because the content is quickly outdated for what students are learning in the project.

3 Students often display more **ownership** over their learning, including task management, because of the process of a project.

4 Regardless of age or content, students are frequently provided opportunities to develop a variety of 21st century skills, such as **collaboration** and **communication**.

5 PBL is **flexible**, meaning the framework allows teachers and students to be responsive to student and community needs and interests.

6 Assessment is frequent throughout a project and includes **feedback** from the teacher mid-project so that the student has opportunities to grow over the course of the project. PBL is action-oriented, meaning students are expected to **DO** something with their knowledge by applying it or inspiring others to do something.

7 PBL pushes beyond rote memorization and requires students to **dig deeper** in their learning and thinking through application and innovation of new ideas/solutions.

What PBL is *Not*

Unfortunately, because PBL has become a buzz word in education, its definition has become diluted. Schools will often use the word “project” interchangeably with PBL, and that is not an even swap. As a parent, it’s your right to know the “look-fors” for QUALITY PBL. Sometimes the easiest way to do that is to say what PBL is NOT:

MYSTERIOUS - You and your child should never wonder what the students are learning. Communication of standards and learning objectives should be very clear. Similarly, students should not ever wonder where their grade/learning stands because they are working closely with the teacher to improve, based on ongoing feedback.

CHAOTIC - While there is such thing as a healthy “buzz” in PBL, your child should never feel as though the classroom is out of control and lacking structure/order.

SCRIPTED - Worksheets and quizzes may pop up in a project, but it should not be the only form of activity you see or hear of your child doing.

DONE AT HOME - While there may be some additional research conducted at home, the majority of project work should be completed under the supervision of the teacher to frequently assess student learning.

GROUP GRADES - Many projects will have collaborative components, but every child should be individually assessed on content mastery and skill development.

EXPENSIVE - You should not be asked to purchase additional materials for any project; for a project to be truly equitable, all students should have access to materials at school. While donations may be welcome to the class, you should not individually be asked to make group project purchases.

ARTS AND CRAFTS - While students will design beautiful work, part of what makes it beautiful is the rigor in the learning that guided the final product. PBL is not “fluff”; it’s “grown up stuff”!

COMPLETED AT THE END - Students should be introduced to the project in the beginning, constantly coming back to its purpose and contextualizing their learning as part of the project process.

Home Connection

Because text books have a diminishing presence in schools due to access of information through technology, you likely won't see students reading and answering questions in the same format that you did as children growing up. Similarly, because PBL is done mostly under the supervision of the teacher, you may not see a whole lot at home. This doesn't mean your child is not learning! You can find out what your child is learning in a project by asking them open-ended questions such as:



Can you tell me about the project you are working on right now? What is the final product you are creating?



Why are you completing this project? Does it relate to an issue in the community? How do you feel about that issue? Has this project opened your eyes? What do people need to know about this?



Who is seeing your project work? Are you sharing your work with an audience of some sort?



What kind of feedback have you received during this project? What goals do you have to improve, based on that feedback?

Classroom communication is also critical in PBL. Hopefully your teacher has set up some sort of an account (a class Shutterfly account, social media, class website, or maybe an app such as SeeSaw) to share photos of learning so you can see what students are working on. You can make it a habit to review these photos at night with your child and ask the questions above. If your teacher hasn't established one of these accounts, you can help by volunteering to set it up and manage it for the class!

A project newsletter is always an appreciated form of communication in PBL. At the beginning of the project, the teacher may send home a quick overview of what students are learning,

important information and resources, dates about the final product or performance, and any opportunities for parent participation along the way. You can keep this newsletter posted on your refrigerator at home as a way to check in frequently with your child on the progress of the project. Again, if your teacher hasn't sent a newsletter home, you can help by volunteering to set up a template and/or upload pertinent information to send home to the class. It's important to remember that PBL is **A LOT** of work for your teacher, so while it's important to share what you appreciate regarding communication, it's equally as important to be a partner and offer to help with tasks such as these so that teacher time is freed up to focus on designing your child's learning!

Rolling with PBL

Your role in PBL is critical as a partner for success!

Chances are your child may be learning about things that are new and interesting to you, so be a model of inquiry and learn alongside your child. Maybe this means doing research together (and this could be as simple as asking Siri or Alexa a question that comes up for you as you discuss the project), attending a local event together, or sharing a related media clip that you ran across on social media or at work that day. Commit to making as many real-world connections to projects as you can.

PBL provides so many opportunities for students to develop a growth mindset and have ownership over their learning. While it may be tempting to try to solve their problems for them, it's critical that you step back and ask them the tough questions. Encourage your child to utilize project resources provided, refer to project assessment tools and directions, seek feedback, and advocate for any personal learning needs. If after doing these things, your child is still experiencing frustration or confusion in a project, then be sure to reach out to the teacher and ask how you can approach it as a team. Discuss what the project goals are and how can you all work together to help your child be successful.

Be a project resource. When your child's teacher sends home the project newsletter, you may right away think of a connection you have. Maybe an interesting guest speaker, a donor, or location for students to visit as field work for their project comes to mind. Similarly, perhaps YOU can come in and give students feedback on a project draft, be an audience for rehearsal, or even do a demonstration for the class. You can go an extra step and offer to coordinate these connections for your teacher.

Questions to Ask Your School

As a parent, you may be considering a PBL school for your child but aren't sure what questions to ask when you tour a campus. Or you may be heavily involved in a school community where projects are happening in some classes. Or maybe you are at a school where you wish projects were happening. Whatever your situation is, here are some good conversation starters:

- 1 *How are students being assessed and provided feedback throughout projects?*
- 2 *What and how are standards being addressed throughout projects?*
- 3 *How are projects different from traditional approaches to covering the same content?*
- 4 *How will I know what my child is learning each day? Where should we look for all pertinent project information?*
- 5 *If students are working in groups, what measures are being taken to ensure equal thinking, not just equal doing, amongst all group members?*
- 6 *What if my child is having a difficult time with a student in their group?*
- 7 *What do we (myself and my child) do if my child's learning needs are not being met in the current project?*

PBL is promising as a vehicle for student engagement and preparation for an advancing society and global economy. All students deserve this opportunity! It's important to remember that the work of PBL is challenging. It requires a lot from all involved: teachers, students, parents, and communities. Hopefully, with this quick guide, you feel informed and empowered to take an active roll in supporting PBL for your child.

Additional Resources

Check out additional reading, research, and resources at craftedcurriculum.com or bring Jenny to your school to speak to your parent community about PBL. Contact jenny@craftedcurriculum.com.



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