



Advancing Project-based Learning in OUSD: Best Practices and Tradeoffs

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PLUS QUESTION: What are promising models and structural and curricular conditions necessary for facilitating high quality Project-based Learning in OUSD; and what are the challenges of launching an effective and authentic Project-based Learning program in a large school?

ISSUE: Project-based Learning (PBL) is a teaching method that guides students through the process of designing and implementing projects about social problems or phenomena grounded in their interests. As a pedagogical approach, PBL fits well within the Oakland Unified School District's Linked Learning academic framework, which prioritizes giving students opportunities to connect with professional communities and apply their learning outside of school.

The conditions required to facilitate PBL can be difficult to create and sustain, particularly in large schools with limited time and resources. Indeed, facilitating high quality PBL entails guiding students to produce projects that are *Authentic, Academically rigorous*, encourage *Applied learning* and *Active exploration*, foster relationships with *Adults* beyond the school community, and require students to reflect through project *Assessment*.¹ The difficulty of satisfying these criteria in large schools is magnified when teachers have limited planning time and when administrators have limited capacity to build partnerships with local industry. My main research tasks, therefore, have been to identify the conditions necessary for high quality PBL facilitation, and to investigate whether large schools can adopt structural or curricular changes in order to successfully integrate more PBL into daily or weekly instruction.

METHODS: Interviews were conducted with three OUSD administrators, and with educators at MetWest High School, Fremont High School, and Oakland Technical High School regarding best practices, qualitative outcomes, and tradeoffs of embracing PBL.

FINDINGS:

After interviewing multiple educational leaders in OUSD, the following conditions emerged as necessary for facilitating authentic PBL:

- 1) Daily planning time for teachers to create/supplement curricula on student-driven projects.
- 2) Maximized opportunities for students to exert choice in project topics or methods.
- 3) Maximized collaboration opportunities for teachers engaging in PBL.
- 4) High teacher investment in the outcomes of student-driven projects.
- 5) Low teacher turnover or project documentation to sustain PBL work if staffing changes.

¹ These criteria are known as "The Six A's of Designing Projects," from Steinberg, Adria. *Real Learning, Real Work: School-to-work as High School Reform*. New York: Routledge, 1998. Page 24.



PLUS Fellows Policy Brief 2015

Promising PBL practices in OUSD: Whole School + Classroom PBL Practices

MetWest High School: School Wide PBL

PBL focus: Social issues of personal interest

Description: PBL infuses the curricula across grades at MetWest. Every student engages in self-driven projects grounded in their internship experiences and personal interests.

Scalable insight? Whole school holds high expectations for PBL outcomes, and students rise to the occasion, as evidenced by their end-of-quarter exhibitions, during which students showcase projects and demonstrate competencies in public speaking, professionalism, and critical thinking.

Oakland Technical High School: Classroom-based PBL - "The Taking Action Project"

PBL focus: Civic Engagement

Description: PBL-incorporated civic engagement project in 9th grade Social Studies course, "California Studies"

Scalable insight? With the support of the district's EDDA Initiative, this teacher created and guided students through "The Taking Action Project." Students identified social problems of personal interest, took action to address those problems, and reflected on the repercussions of their actions. This curriculum demonstrates that, with adequate support, teachers can bring profound elements of PBL into their individual classrooms.

LESSONS: Bringing elements of PBL into high school classrooms in OUSD does not require bringing to scale the PBL models of schools such as MetWest, where the structure and curriculum across grade levels reflects school-wide investment in PBL. In fact, as demonstrated by the outcomes of "The Taking Action Project"² conducted by ninth grade students at Oakland Technical High School, **when school communities allot the time and resources necessary to satisfy these conditions, students can enjoy the benefits of PBL regardless of school size or structure.** It is important to note, however, that facilitating authentic PBL requires significant time, which may limit a teacher or school's capacity to achieve other instructional goals during school hours.

RECOMMENDATIONS: OUSD's Linked Learning Office should incentivize high school communities to implement the conditions required for facilitation of high quality PBL. Doing so would provide teachers and students with adequate structural support when engaging in PBL at a whole-school or classroom level. Implementing all of these conditions will take time, however. Educators can initiate or supplement high school PBL programs in the meantime by borrowing from the PBL exemplars described above. Large school communities can also consider following the curricula of current high quality PBL initiatives such as the district's Educating for Democracy in the Digital Age (EDDA), which supports OUSD teachers in developing civic engagement curricula, and UC Berkeley's Y-PLAN, a model for youth civic engagement in city planning. Each of these options would provide educators with effective and structured entry into authentic PBL and are adaptable at an individual classroom or whole-school level of implementation.

² Tyson, Jessica. "The Taking Action Project." Educating for Democracy in the Digital Age, n.d. Web. <<http://eddaoakland.org/teachers/edda-curriculum/taking-action-9th-grade/>>.