

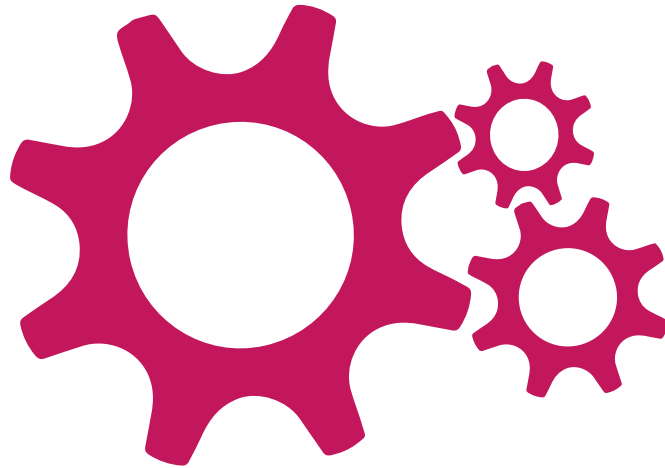


Roadmap for Project Based Learning Success

School District Model



WORKBENCH
Project Based Learning



Preparing students for 21st century skills and advancement remains a high priority in K-12 schools, and while getting the latest digital technologies into students' hands may contribute to meeting this preparation goal, technology is only as good as the context that surrounds it. As administrators and technology leaders expand upon district-wide initiatives for 21st century technology skills, the implementation of Project Based Learning (PBL) provides an excellent and natural method for expanding digital technology training.

This paper discusses strategies for:

- Implementing a successful PBL program in your district
- Systemizing PBL for smooth teacher transition and buy-in
- Assessment measures to ensure the program meets student content standards





Supporting the Purpose of the Transition

The primary purpose of using PBL as a key force behind standards mastery lies in providing authentic, relatable problems to solve that also foster increased critical thinking skills within a team structure (versus group work). It's important to keep in mind that “authentic” does not necessarily mean “immediate” or “real.” A pitfall of some schools who try to incorporate PBL is believing that students must directly solve a community problem, or that they must present their findings to appropriate community members. The former is **Service Learning**, which is a different, albeit valuable initiative. The latter might be beneficial, but unnecessary for students to take away the potential for further application of acquired knowledge. For example, if students are exploring the various pollutants to water and their effects, they are already developing authentic knowledge without having to contact the city or state's natural resources commissioner.

Certainly including expert community members is a best practice. Expecting this to occur all year in every grade level and school, however, can prohibit full participation in the PBL initiative. Districts can incorporate PBL as a core strategy by training staff to embrace as many of the key design elements as often as they can.

In the planning stages of gaining buy-in from primary stakeholders, Bradley-Levine et al. provide a solid **review of literature** in their case study which covers the purpose and benefits of PBL within a classroom setting, including higher achievement on content-based assessments.





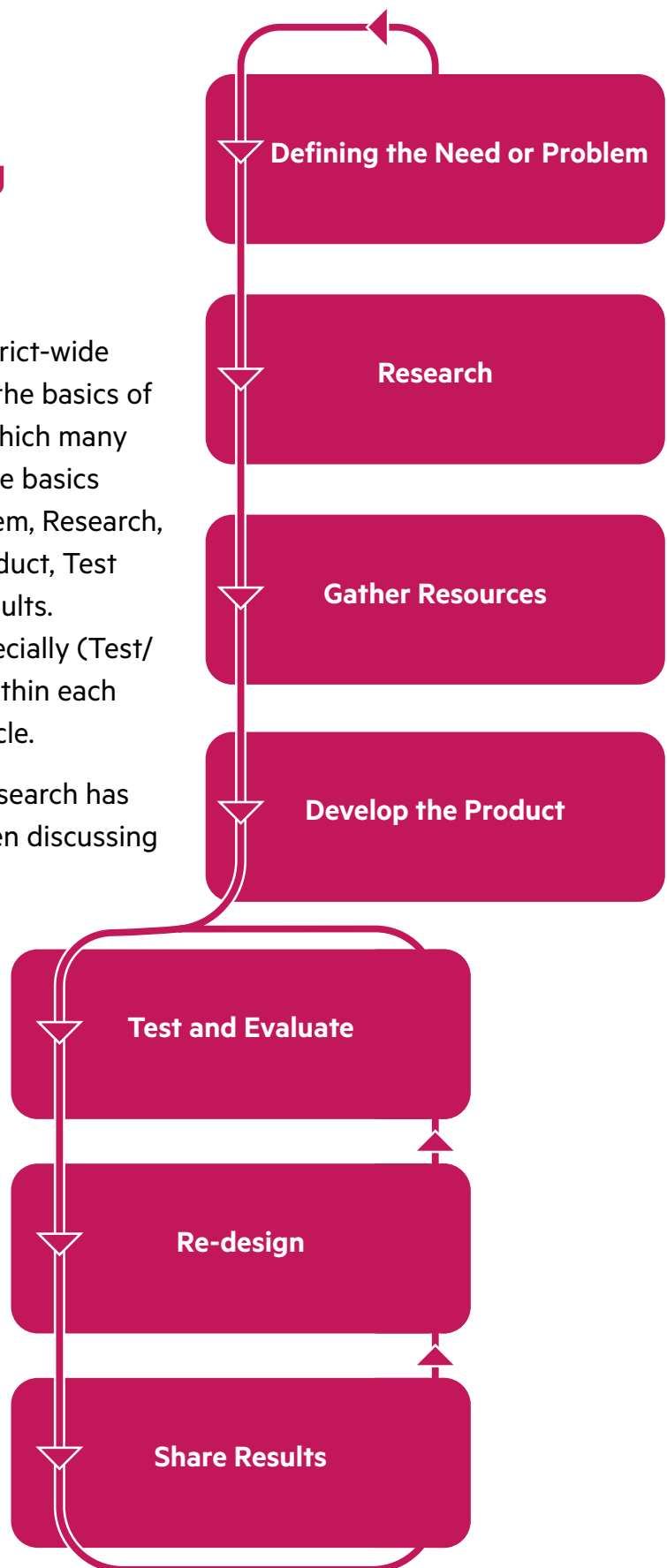
Strategies for Preparing for District-Wide PBL Implementation

In order to implement PBL as a district-wide initiative, the best plan is to utilize the basics of **Engineering Project Design**, from which many project design models originate. The basics include Defining the Need or Problem, Research, Gather Resources, Develop the Product, Test and Evaluate, Re-Design, Share Results. Note that the final three steps, especially (Test/Evaluate, Re-Design, Share) loop within each other before rejoining the larger cycle.

Defining the Need/Problem and Research has already been addressed above, when discussing the support for transition to PBL. The following will continue with the next steps:

Gather Resources

Beginning this process relies on finding teacher leaders within each district, sharing initial PBL projects that have been used successfully, and creating a small team to establish a professional development (PD) plan that will grow over time.





Finding Teacher Leaders

Teacher leaders don't necessarily have to have specifically implemented PBL in their classrooms, but they should be those who have been recognized for their innovative experimentation within the classroom --and they should be secure with digital technology. Ideally, though, they will be well familiar with what PBL is (and isn't) and will have tried some small version of it at some point. Those same teachers can then submit both what they have done in the PBL arena and what their colleagues have done. Having these ideas and projects on hand provides a baseline for the direction and pacing for PD training.

Creating the PBL Team

Depending on the size of the district, only a handful of these teacher leaders will be involved within the core planning stages. The core team for planning a large scale implementation of PBL needs to be relatively small, yet fully representative. This team might include colleagues from the following areas: curriculum and instruction, professional development (if a separate department exists), principals from each grade cluster, an elementary school teacher, a middle school teacher, a high school teacher, a special education teacher, and a specialist/elective teacher. As the strategic planning solidifies, the team might expand to communications and finance.

Professional Development Strategy

Ideally, the core team in conjunction with the teacher leaders will spend time developing standards-based PBL topics and projects to assist with initial teacher PD. These pre-created ideas and projects certainly don't all have to be re-inventions of the wheel. They can include what teachers have already been using, as well as those shared widely on the web.

A summer workshop for teacher leaders and the core planning team provides the time for full development of the action plan for the upcoming year(s), and workshop week should have a kick-off focus on the new initiative. A part of each PD release day should be devoted to expanding on the key ideas behind PBL, along with at least one practical takeaway lesson or baseline project ready for modification.





PD Workshop Planning

A three-day workshop might look like this:

Day 1

Review/Introduction of the Gold Standard Elements of Project Based Learning. Discussion of how it connects to standards-based learning and 21st Century skills. Explore examples. Examine case studies. Strategize how the transition will look in the district and within individual buildings.

Day 2

Continue with strategies for implementation, including common obstacles, resources, and time investment. Map out year-long rollout of PD and support.

Day 3

Gather/Collate/Develop tiered PBL lessons and projects for each grade level and subject.

Develop the Product



In order to meet success with deep implementation of PBL there needs to be strong school support, access to well-developed projects, and a collaborative culture for teachers and students.

(Jane L. David, What Research Says About Project-Based Learning)

Repository of Resources

One of the most underestimated and therefore underutilized elements of institutional change in instructional delivery is the systemization of resources. When new technology is introduced, staff may have the training, but they need ongoing support: e.g., documents or other tutorial resources to reference for refreshers. If a district introduces 1:1 iPads or Chromebooks, but many teachers have never used them before, training on basic use of the device is insufficient. Providing a repository of adapted, enhanced, and transformed lessons to pull from acts not only as an inspiration for their own lessons, but as a safe haven for those drowning in the changes.





Creating a Collaborative Culture

“ *Teacher collaboration not only saves time, and makes work easier, it improves the quality of curriculum. While it is best to hold regular grade-level meetings with teachers in your school, and even your district, curriculum sharing websites are re-defining the realms teachers can explore to find new methods and materials.* (Vanessa Vega, *A Primer on Curriculum-Sharing Sites*)

The district technology team can play a major role in fostering collaboration by providing internal or external spaces for easily uploading ideas, organizing files and resources-- and accessing content. A platform like [Workbench](#) lends itself to this kind of space for PBL lessons and projects, while also providing access to cross-district and cross-partner lesson plans that foster the improvement of quality that Vega validates above. Regardless of the method the district chooses, an easily accessible database is vital for continuous improvement of PBL implementation.

Including PBL in your Professional Learning Communities

Additional opportunity lies in the continued PD time throughout the year. The PD release days have at least half of their time dedicated to PBL training and collaboration (especially in the early phases of implementation). The other arena for PD is Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Whether or not PLCs are required in the district or strongly encouraged, at least one goal (if not the only goal, as PLCs should be fairly focused in their purpose) will include the development of PBL resources: specific lessons, improvement upon management of students and classroom time, expansion of lessons or projects already in place, or transformation of future topics of study to match the PBL model.

Test and Evaluate

Changing the instructional model brings about the most challenging aspect: measuring its effectiveness.

Compare Year over Year Results

Organizations like [Buck Institute for Education](#) (BIE) offer several variations of rubrics that can evaluate student progress through PBL (including content mastery, process, collaboration). Likely, this student progress is disconnected to many teachers' PLC goal, as it provides a concrete measurement. Pulling data from past years of student mastery over similar content covered in the PBL unit(s) offers a comparison, demonstrating whether or not the PBL method was successful.





Survey Teachers

Achievement of PLC goals is one area of district-wide measurement. Another can be gleaned from survey analysis. A well-crafted teacher survey provides information on how widespread the PBL lessons were, how well supported the implementation was, and overall attitude towards the shift.

A final area of district-wide measurement can include standardized test scores, but not until deeper implementation has taken place over the course of the next two-five years.

Redesign

Looking at the results of surveys and test scores allows for some specific targeting on areas of improvement. Questions to focus on for re-design/improvement:

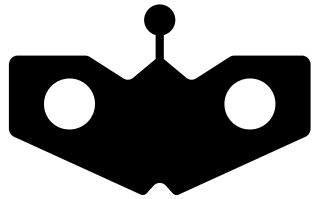
- Was there enough PD and extended PD support?**
- In what areas did teachers especially struggle?**
- What resources or systems alignment did teachers need more of?**
- Did teachers feel supported and recognized?**
- How many teachers accessed the resources database/repository?**
- How many contributed to it?**
- What kinds of modifications were made to existing projects and lessons?**
- What lessons or units were transformed?**

Any restructuring plan, no matter how well thought out, requires evaluation and redesign for continual improvement.

Share Results

Don't forget to share progress to all stakeholders! Take advantage of social media outlets to expand the reach to more and more expert audiences who can also eventually be tapped for authentic, real-world recipients and evaluators for students. Sharing results also increases cross-district collaboration, which strengthens all teaching.





WORKBENCH

Project Based Learning

Workbench is a PBL platform where teachers can create, share, and assign projects within their school and district. If teachers are new to PBL or are short on time, they can choose from a library of pre-created projects searchable by standard, grade, subject, and project duration.

[Here's a quick overview of the Workbench Platform](#)

The Platform is already used in over 10,000 schools around the world, making the creative and collaboration power strong.

We also offer customized professional development around best practices, content development, and can get your teachers trained and started on using 21st Century Technology.

[Schedule a Demo](#)