Project Based Learning

In Project Based Learning, teachers make learning come alive for students.

Students work on a project over an extended period of time – from a week up to a semester – that engages them in solving a real-world problem or answering a complex question. They demonstrate their knowledge and skills by creating a public product or presentation for a real audience.

As a result, students develop deep content knowledge as well as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication skills. Project Based Learning unleashes a contagious, creative energy among students and teachers.

How does PBL differ from "doing a project"?

PBL is becoming widely used in schools and other educational settings, with different varieties being practiced. However, there are key characteristics that differentiate "doing a project" from engaging in rigorous Project Based Learning.

We find it helpful to distinguish a "dessert project" - a short, intellectually-light project served up after the teacher covers the content of a unit in the usual way - from a "main course" project, in which the project *is* the unit. In Project Based Learning, the project is the vehicle for teaching the important knowledge and skills student need to learn. The project contains and frames curriculum and instruction.

In contrast to dessert projects, PBL requires critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and various forms of communication. To answer a driving question and create high-quality work, students need to do much more than remember information. They need to use higher-order thinking skills and learn to work as a team.

The gold standard for high-quality PBL

To help ensure your students are getting the main course and are engaging in quality Project Based Learning, PBLWorks promotes a research-informed model for "Gold Standard PBL."

The Gold Standard PBL model encompasses two useful guides for educators:

1) Seven Essential Project Design Elements provide a framework for developing high quality projects for your classroom, and

2) Seven Project Based Teaching Practices help teachers, schools, and organizations improve, calibrate, and assess their practice.
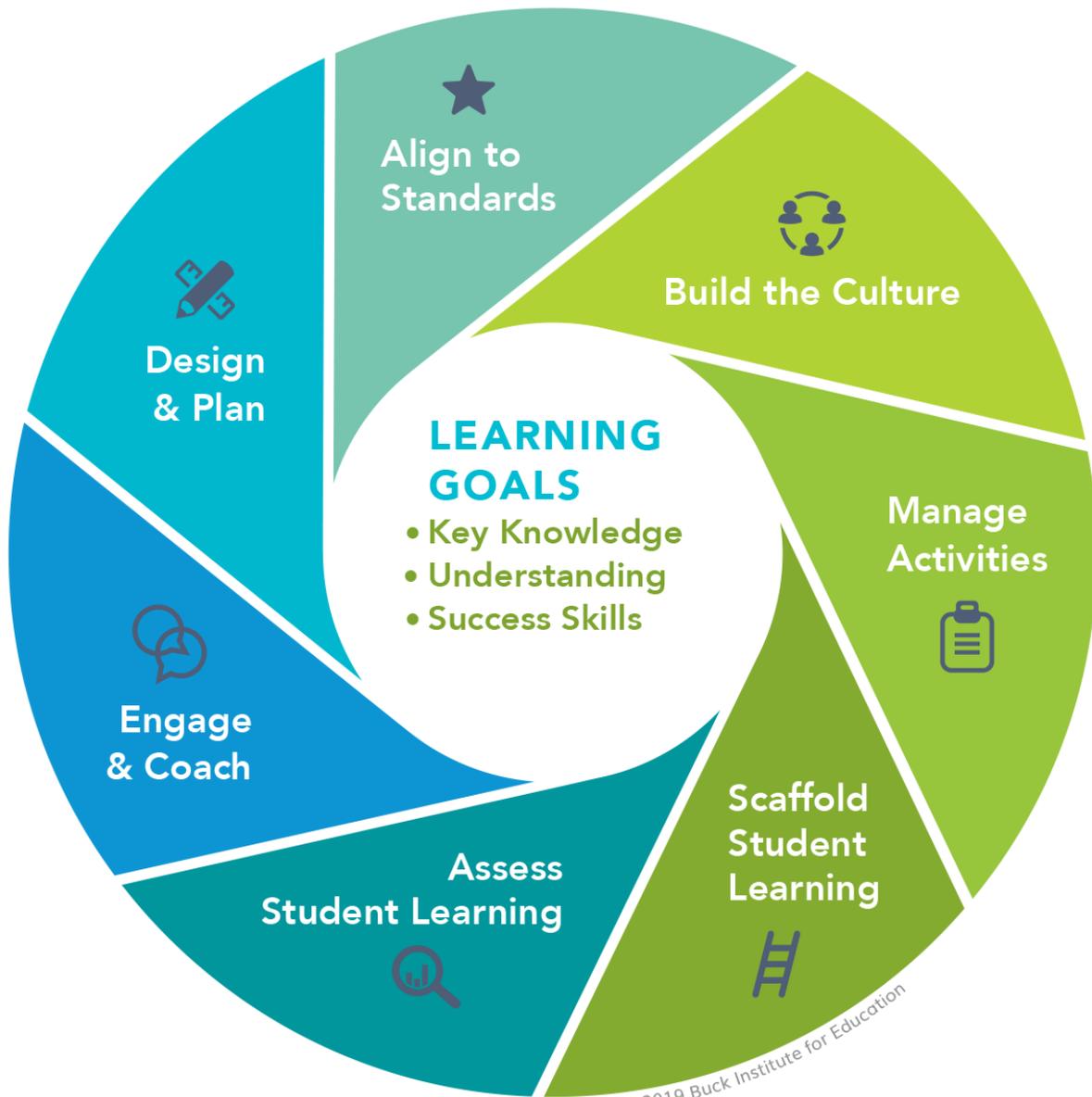
Gold Standard PBL

Seven Essential Project Design Elements

LEARNING GOALS
- Key Knowledge
- Understanding
- Success Skills

Sustained Inquiry

Authenticity

Challenging Problem or Question

Student Voice & Choice

Public Product

Reflection

Critique & Revision

Gold Standard PBL

Seven Project Based Teaching Practices

- Align to Standards
- Build the Culture
- Manage Activities
- Scaffold Student Learning
- Assess Student Learning
- Engage & Coach
- Design & Plan

LEARNING GOALS
- Key Knowledge
- Understanding
- Success Skills

The Gold Standard PBL model aligns with the High Quality PBL Framework. This framework describes what students should be doing, learning, and experiencing in a good project. Learn more at HQPBL.org.

And in case you were looking for a more formal definition...

Project Based Learning is a teaching method in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging, and complex question, problem, or challenge.

Impact on students

PBL blends content mastery, meaningful work, and personal connection to create powerful learning experiences, in terms of both academic achievement and students' personal growth.

PBL can be transformative for students, especially those furthest from educational opportunity. Now more than ever, we need young people who are ready, willing, and able to tackle the challenges of their lives and the world they will inherit - and nothing prepares them better than Project Based Learning.

Here are just some of the ways that PBL transforms students' educational experiences:
Engaged hearts and minds

Students actively engage with PBL projects that provide real-world relevance for learning. Students can solve problems that are important to them and their communities.

Deeper learning

PBL leads to deeper understanding and greater retention of content knowledge. Students are better able to apply what they know to new situations.

Exposure to adults and careers

Students interact with adults, businesses and organizations, and their community, and can develop career interests.

A sense of purpose

A great project can be transformative for students. Seeing a real-world impact gives them a sense of agency and purpose.

Success skills

Students gain skills valuable in today's workplace and in life, such as how to take initiative, work responsibly, solve problems, collaborate in teams, and communicate ideas.

Rewarding teacher relationships

Teachers work closely with active, engaged students doing meaningful work, and share in the rediscovered joy of learning.

Creativity and technology

Students enjoy using a spectrum of technology tools from research and collaboration through product creation and presentation.

8 Ways to Get Started with Project Based Learning

Maybe you've started to scratch the surface, and you're ready to go deeper.

Great! You're exactly who we're here to help. We've created this guide to lead you into the world of PBL one step at a time.

1

Get into a PBL state of mind

Okay, full disclosure here: Project Based Learning isn't an approach you master in a matter of weeks, or even months. It's a journey that unfolds year over year, as you develop your practice, learn alongside your students, and grow with experience. And, if you've already read a bit about Project Based Learning and you still have questions, you're not alone.

2

Let's Workshop

Ask anyone who's successful with PBL, and they'll probably tell you that the ideal way to get into it is through an immersive multi-day workshop. After training more than 190,000 educators this way, PBLWorks is known for providing the perfect first step into the world of PBL. Our workshops give you a sense of what PBL looks and feels like, and you'll come away ready to implement a project in your classroom.

Find an online or on-site workshop

3

Or, start by doing the reading

If you just want to dip your toes in the PBL pool for now, pick up a good book on the subject. Here's our recommended reading list.

Setting the Standard for Project Based Learning - The why, what, and how of Gold Standard PBL, with guidance for K-12 teachers and school leaders. Get the book

Project Based Teaching: How to Create Rigorous and Engaging Learning Practices - The ultimate guide for K-12 teachers on how to implement the 7 Project Based Teaching Practices in Gold Standard PBL, with examples, tools, and tips.

4

Ready to go bigger? Bring us to your school or district.

For a more personalized group experience, PBLWorks can schedule an immersive multi-day PBL workshop exclusively for you and your colleagues, online or onsite at your location. This approach will jumpstart Project Based Learning at your school or district, for the most powerful immediate impact.

5

Have a look before you leap into PBL

Want to see how Project Based Learning works, from launch through final public presentations? Watch one of these 7- to 10-minute long videos.

Shot in six classrooms across the U.S., these videos show PBL in action, with students in grades K-12 immersed in math, chemistry, history, ELA, and more.

Here's one of our favorites, featuring third graders at the Katherine Smith Elementary School in San Jose, CA, designing tiny houses.

6

Check out over 70 Gold Standard PBL project ideas

Our growing PBL Project Library holds a collection of more than 70 Gold Standard project ideas, created for a range of grade levels and subject areas. Aligned to Common Core, NGSS, and other national standards, the project include driving questions, project descriptions, and recommendations for making products public. Each one offers a great starting point for newbies, and inspiration for more experienced practitioners.

7

Get the download - free tools and resources

Free PBL-related goodies, anyone? We have planning forms, rubrics, student handouts, and more for you to download. Some are created by PBLWorks, and others are collected from fellow PBL enthusiasts.

8

Hear other sides of the story

Don't just take our word for it. Hear firsthand from the teachers, school leaders, students, and parents who've seen Project Based Learning in action, in our collection of **Stories and Testimonials**.

Or read our **PBL Blog**, where we share more stories, projects, and practical advice.