



## Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

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### ‘Critical Questions’ Series March 2017

#### **Critical Question Series: How Does Project Based Learning (PBL) Ignite Enthusiasm and an Appetite for Deep Learning for Both Students and Teachers?**

Highly engaging learning, much like life, is a never ending process of encountering problems and exploring solutions. Project based learning is a powerful solution to the complex problem of practice educators continually encounter. How do we create the conditions in which students and teachers are truly engaged in learning that is meaningful, connected and real?

In a PBL classroom, learning is designed to answer essential questions, commonly generated by the students, to explore content across disciplines. Real world, relevant topics provide the why that fuels students to ask and answer increasingly more rigorous questions in a personally and socially meaningful context. PBL classrooms are well suited for cooperative learning, developing essential college and career ready skills. Both students and staff are engaged in authentic learning that is co-generated and collaborative. Units of study develop over several weeks leading up to demonstrations of learning including complex projects and presentations. It’s real, a bit messy at times and thoroughly captivating for all involved.

PBL allows kids to be kids! Students ask a lot of questions (i.e., Can we live on Mars? Why do we need trees? Where does all the rain water go?). PBL gives learners the freedom to exercise that natural curiosity about life. In a PBL environment, answers are not provided for students instead they are allowed the means to discover the answers. Encouraged to pursue their own curiosity, learning which tools to use, students experience real success as problem solvers and creative thinkers. Within this context, learning how to read, write and solve mathematical problems has direct purpose and application. Students own their learning and are motivated to learn content and skills. Students practice collaborative skills like active listening, giving and receiving feedback, and valuing others’ knowledge and skills.

Likewise, teachers access their natural curiosity about the art and science of teaching. By working together, teachers research topics, plan which state standards students will learn, and refine their own collaboration skills. For experienced teachers and new teachers, there is genuine professional growth and excitement for their communal work. Experienced teachers share their knowledge of effective instruction and content. New teachers infuse collaboration with innovative technology and pedagogy. PBL fosters more organic collaboration. Teachers seek out opportunities to work together during breaks, after school, and online. Healthy professional relationships, essential to successful schools, are created through doing the work together. PBL provides the opportunity for staff to work

closely together on things that matter to them which deepens staff bonds and mutual respect. They encourage each other, push each other gently, and grow together; a genuine professional learning community.

So what does it look like in real life? Sherman Elementary, is a K-5 school in Tacoma with 426 students. The Sherman teaching staff is strong in the sciences and our families include artists, professionals and creative entrepreneurs. It's the perfect mix of techies and fuzzies! The staff started small with a few teachers collaborating around PBL cycles. Their enthusiasm and success spread throughout the building. Now, five years later, we do multiple PBL cycles school wide each year. We integrate literacy, math, and art into science based cycles. Informational texts at different complexity levels are used for research. Parents with professional expertise (a chef, an entomologist, a salmon biologist, a cartoonist) and business partners (a farmer, retailers, architectural firms) add to the richness of classroom discussions. Students use our Maker Space to create prototypes and revise and rebuild after receiving feedback from these experts. Teaching and learning is fun, engaging for teachers and students, and rewarding for everyone.

Project based learning is an answer to the age old problem of how to enhance student and staff engagement to improve learning outcomes. At Sherman, the ownership of learning is clear and compelling for both students and staff. Resources are abundant: curiosity, questioning, collaboration, commitment and community. It all starts with a problem that needs a solution or a question that needs an answer. Students and teachers alike have plenty of those!

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