











Authenticity



Public Product



Collaboration



Project Management



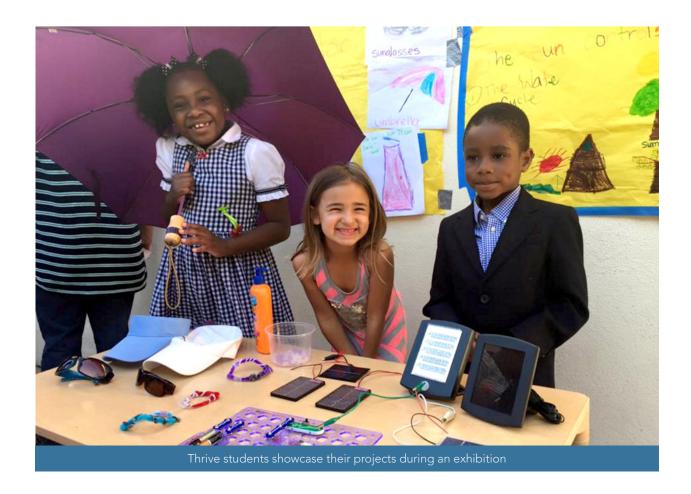
Reflection

The Framework for High Quality Project Based Learning (HQPBL) describes PBL in terms of the student experience. It describes six criteria, each of which must be at least minimally present in a project in order for it to be judged "high quality." The six criteria were chosen as a necessary starting point for providing students access to HQPBL because they are an essential baseline, but they are not all-encompassing.

Projects that are the most memorable, and that have the greatest impact on student learning and development, will be those with the highest quality implementation of each criterion. The case study that follows highlights the six criteria and is intended to provide readers with a real-world example of HQPBL.

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While some teaching methods might reflect the zeitgeist of another era, many educators are finding that Project Based Learning (PBL) successfully transcends backgrounds, languages, and students' past experiences.

At Thrive Public Schools, Project Based Learning is defined by projects that are:

- rooted in a real-world problem;
- framed by a wicked question;
- ▶ include a community expert or external connection ("field work," "onsite lecture")
- involve beautiful work and craftsmanship in a final product;
- incorporate peer critique and feedback;
- > and share in a public presentation to an authentic audience.

A Change in Desired Outcomes

"It used to be that 15 years ago, I could ask a roomful of parents what they want for their kids," Dr. Nicole Assisi said. "They would offer mainly SEL outcomes: 'I want my child to be happy, fulfilled, kind, etc.'"

Parents at Thrive Public Schools, which was launched in 2014, have a different (and in some ways, much more complicated) answer.

"Now, when I ask them the very same question, that room of parents—whose kids I'm still teaching—responds differently. They want their children to get into college, to be able to secure a good job, and to be happy. It has been fascinating to witness the changes in their responses over time, and I think it's indicative of the demands we place on education today."

Those demands have been proven tough to meet. Assisi said that in K-12 education, many stakeholders have been seeking the "one silver bullet"—teachers included—and have been overlooking the fact that as the desired outcome has become more complex, the solutions they've used to attempt to reach it have simplified. This dissonance has led to incongruent expectations, widespread disappointment and eventually, disillusionment with the education system. Instead, achieving complex outcomes requires more multifaceted, holistic processes.



HQPBL: Part of a Winning Equation in K-12 Academics

Truly high quality PBL (HQPBL) experiences are igniting enthusiasm in students starting in Kindergarten, where the youngest students are collaborating on intellectually challenging problems—and they're seeing real-world impact. As students advance, their experiences build with greater complexity; however, PBL is not the only approach to learning that students experience in their studies. Instead, Thrive embraces a solution that melds PBL with blended learning rotations and SEL, among other methodologies. Assisi believes that PBL is critical and yet still insufficient on its own in properly meeting the needs of a diverse population such as that within Thrive. Helping kids to be career-focused might not be the right driver to help them be college-prepared, she explained.

"Our belief is that without PBL, you won't have kids inspired enough to get to and through college," Assisi said. "It's not the right mode to employ for kids who have been underserved and underrepresented—it won't help anyone in crushing the SATs or successfully navigating higher education." She added that the reverse scenario is also worrisome.

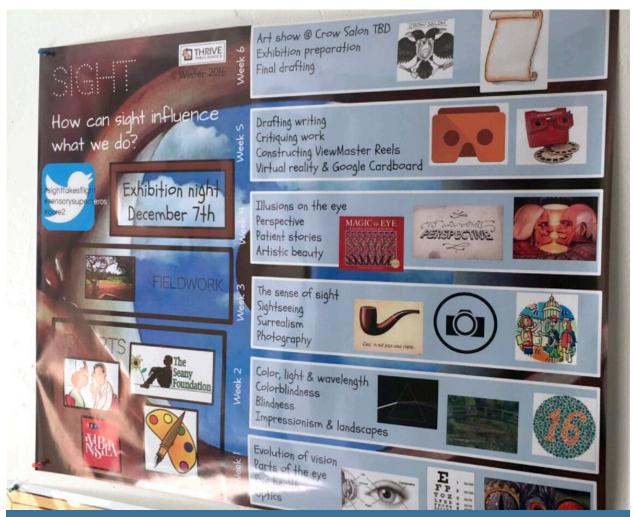


"If PBL isn't an integral part of their education, students won't have the passion, persistence, and sense of purpose that outcomes-based PBL brings. So we understand that PBL can get students through college, but it can't be the method relied upon to gain them entry."

PBL provides an opportunity for students to work on authentic, real-world challenges—the kind that equip them with a diverse skill set to tackle the kinds of obstacles higher education, and later, their professional lives, may very well present. Yet when educators advocate for PBL as the exclusive approach to take, Assisi responds by saying, "Yes—PBL and...?" She believes that bolstering students' vocabulary and content skills are more effectively delivered in another modality.

PBL's Key Ingredient: Project Management

Assisi cited some confusion in the broader academic community surrounding elements of problem-based learning and activity-based learning that were similar but not exactly PBL. Those approaches lack the project management elements that incorporate goals, deadlines, estimates, and scopes of work that truly set PBL apart from other methods. Thrive's students can clearly view and manage these aspects using visual project maps, which articulate weekly objectives and tasks in a straightforward, time-bound format.



Project maps are created with students so students start to learn how to manage their work and time

"PBL awakens joy and passion. But in terms of teaching methods, we need PBL to be part of a broader set of approaches," she said. "We as educators and parents want complex outcomes; the list of attributes we want our kids to have goes on and on, and yet we keep trying to simplify the process that will somehow get students there. What we've found at Thrive is that you have to be comfortable working within a complex process. If you have a singular approach, you may likely only get a singular outcome."

The organization is able to accomplish more complex outcomes without limiting themselves to only hiring expert faculty.

"We're committed to training any new teaching staff on our approach to PBL, as it's part of a broader mix of methodologies. To achieve that, we offer layers of teacher training to ensure they have all the tools, the pedagogy, and the vision to lead it the way we believe it should be—and to serve as project managers within their own professional development journeys."

Setting the stage for meaningful professional development at Thrive follows a specific project management process: defining goals, planning how to achieve them, implementing those plans, and adjusting them as needed prior to evaluating their effectiveness. It's an experience mirrored by students at Thrive, who also work through the aforementioned steps in their own projects.

EXAMINING PRIVILEGE & ADVERSITY

"The diversity we have at Thrive Public Schools benefits students across the socioeconomic spectrum, and we work hard to be responsive to it.

For example, some of our students believed that their grade needed to engage with a college counselor sooner than we had initially planned. Because of them, we instituted that change. Also, all of our students have been exposed to the opera—again, because a subset of our student population felt this was important. The kids take initiative to make things happen by bringing in family members and others to offer insights and support. It has created this really cool partnership, where a teacher might say, 'I'm going to do a project around soundwaves.' The parents examine their own networks to see what they can bring to the classroom, to ultimately do more for all, and expose each of our kids at Thrive to more possibilities.

But privilege exists inside a bubble without adversity. At Thrive, our students are teaching one another from their own experiences in the kind of reflective, peer-to-peer learning that doesn't happen in more homogeneous environments. Kids from disadvantaged backgrounds, or those for whom English is a second language, or those whose families have fled their home countries to establish a new life—these students have invaluable lessons and wisdom to share."

Products of Students' Learning

In a recent exhibition, Thrive students from Kindergarten through tenth grade showcased the results of their HQPBL experiences to parents, relatives, teachers, and the community at large.

Kindergarteners: Thrive's youngest students' projects focused on what it means to be community member at Thrive. They created videos where they explained this, and also developed lessons for parents. Their guiding questions included "How do we help new people feel a part of what we do?" and "What are the things someone needs to know to feel fully integrated here?"



- First and second graders: Students in these lower grades made products with the theme of empathy. They created dolls that combined two or more different types of animals and explained the benefits and problem-solving abilities that came along with those animals' unique features. For example: "People think I'm just a spider, but I also have the claws of a lobster." Through this project, the students explored how people don't always see things in their entirety at first glance. They observed animals and sketched them at a zoo, so they could return to the classroom and sew these dolls, which they then gave away to a refugee home San Diego. The goal was to create something tangible and find out how it could be passed on to someone who needs encouragement.
- Third and fourth graders: These students' work centered on "the light of kindness." They learned about bridges of hope and incorporated electrical circuitry, ultimately deciding that they wanted to create lanterns. The questions guiding these students included: "What is the most important thing when you have nothing?" Students decided that people need to feel safe and loved, and that the way they could produce those feelings was by making beautiful lanterns, which illuminated surroundings and featured craftsmanship that showed someone cared.
- Tenth graders: In contrast, Thrive's older students grappled with the concepts of utopia and dystopia, studying literary texts as they tried to determine which state more closely aligned with the current atmosphere in the United States. The students explored which factors—political, environmental, safety, educational, etc.—of their lives and experiences influenced their decisions.

As Thrive looks forward to graduating its first cohort in just a couple of years, the charter school network is making an impact beyond the many neighborhoods of its students in San Diego. The organization continues to serve as a national model for school leaders and teachers who seek to provide students with HQPBL experiences.



Students work together to determine what materials they need to get started on their garden project





This case study was produced by Getting Smart as part of the High Quality Project Based Learning campaign. The goal of the campaign is to identify what high quality PBL student experiences look like and work to ensure all students have access to this type of learning. The campaign is supported by Project Management Institute Educational Foundation (PMIEF) and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and sponsored by the Buck Institute for Education.