

# Snapshots



## RESEARCH REPORT

# Does Project-Based Learning Impact Student Achievement?

Over the years, project-based learning (PBL) has become a preferred teaching approach, especially given its attention to real-world scenarios, student choice, collaboration, and other elements that reflect 21st century skills. But how, exactly, does PBL impact student achievement?

A new study has affirmed that, indeed, project-based learning positively impacts elementary-level students in social studies and in some aspects of literacy education. A group of second-grade students from 48 classrooms in high-poverty, low-performing school districts in Michigan scored higher in both areas

after learning via the PBL approach. Compared to the control group, 63 percent of students gained in social studies and 23 percent gained in informational reading, according to the 2017 study “Putting PBL to the Test: The Impact of Project-Based Learning on Second-Grade Students’ Social Studies and Literacy Learning and Motivation.”

## MYTWOCENTS

What does “personalized learning” look like to you?



**Heather Cramer:** Personalized learning happens when teachers put students at the center of learning. Data is used to determine the student’s level, and the teacher designs lessons to meet the student’s need. Students also take control of their learning by self-initiating the lesson in an online format, such as Schoology.



**Yolanda Wallace:** Personalized learning is when students can articulate their areas of need and are tracking progress toward closing those gaps.

**Fast Fact:** “Over 1.3 million (2.5 percent) of elementary and secondary students were reported as homeless in 2014–15.”

— NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, MAY 2017

“PBL is a very powerful tool to connect students with their communities with real purposes and audiences,” University of Michigan lead researcher, Nell K. Duke, said. “[PBL] appears to be an effective way to improving student achievement.”

### The Study

Researchers administered assessments in social studies, informational reading, and informational writing at the beginning and end of the school year. None of the teachers had prior PBL teaching experience, but they were provided with three hours of foundational professional development in the PBL approach and the first PBL unit. In addition to videoconferencing, coaches from the research team visited teachers an average of 11 times over the course of the year.

Each of the 20 sessions in the unit was described in detail, but left room for teacher and student input. The curriculum was closely aligned to Michigan’s Common Core State Standards for social studies and informational reading and writing.

The Michigan PBL study confirms prior research that attributes student achievement gains to the level of critical thinking involved and higher expectations for students to have a voice in learning. Additionally, the research supports that children’s writing tends to be stronger when writing for an audience beyond the classroom.

### What Principals Can Do

PBL can raise student achievement in high-poverty communities and consistently proves to be a promising educational approach, as a whole. Educators should consider integrating the PBL approach into the curriculum to continue to cultivate students through different learning styles.

“Principals need to think about how to lead the design or redesign of units that maintain essential characteristics of PBL, while addressing specific college- and career-ready standards,” said Duke. “Making matters more complicated, [principals] also need to think about how to incorporate specific research-supported instructional practices.”

In addition to providing professional development for teachers to learn PBL methods, supporting research-based communities geared toward the development of PBL is vital.


“Principals can begin by supporting professional learning communities (PLCs) to study these materials,” Duke added. “It may also be very helpful, at least early on, for teachers to work with PBL units that have already been developed, recognizing the need to adjust those materials to their context and provide opportunities for teacher and student voice and choice.”

Duke and research collaborator Anne-Lise Halvorsen of Michigan State University have developed project-based second-grade social studies and literacy units to download at <http://bit.ly/2tKhrbS>. 

# Reduce Student Absence

Parents may not know that missing as few as two days a month can affect student achievement. Help send the message that attendance every day is important. Here’s how:

- Ensure teachers take roll regularly so students know someone cares when they miss school.
- Ensure all classrooms are nurturing and engaging, so children want to come to school every day.
- Invest in accurate collection and entry of attendance data into student data systems.
- Calculate and analyze chronic absence and good attendance to discern patterns for students.
- Partner with families and community groups to address trending challenges (e.g., unreliable transportation, lack of access to health care).
- Educate parents and children about the importance of attendance starting in the early years.
- Develop and implement a school-wide system of incentives and rewards for good attendance.

Finally, reach out to frequently absent students to find out in a supportive manner why they are missing school and what would help them attend more regularly. For more information, visit [www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org). 



**Gabe Simon:** Students understand where they are and set clear targets for where they need to be. Personalized learning must also involve checkpoints for students to graph and see progress, and goals must be based on each student’s unique learning profile and present levels.



**Bivins Miller (@BivinsMiller):** Personalized learning allows students to demonstrate mastery toward standards based on students’ preference/interest of setting, topic & delivery.

What does personalized learning mean to you? Share your thoughts on Twitter @NAESP.