



Harmony Middle School

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“Wall-to-Wall” Project Based Learning School Opportunity Harmony Middle School

In 2019, Loudoun County Public Schools will be designating a small number of schools as “Wall-to-Wall” PBL Schools. The staff at Harmony have been learning and refining our instruction with PBL for the past four years to best meet the needs of our specific student population. Greater than 95% of the staff is trained in the language, and more importantly, the practices of Project Based Learning. We believe we would be a strong school “candidate” to take on this initiative.

What is Project Based Learning?

Project Based Learning (PBL) is an inquiry based process for teaching and learning. In PBL, students focus on a complex question or problem (frequently student generated) then research the answer or solve the problem through a collaborative process of investigation over time. During the inquiry process, students learn content, information, and facts necessary to draw conclusions about the question. PBL is extremely effective as a method for engaging students in their learning and has several key components referred to as the “Eight Essential Elements.” These eight areas, all of which are necessary components of successful lesson plans, include a challenging problem or question; sustained inquiry; authenticity; student voice and choice; reflection; critique and revision; key knowledge, understanding, and success skills, and a public product.

Why are the Eight Essential Elements Important?

When we think back to our own meaningful learning experiences and how we were able to get to deeper learning, all of the foundational pieces are contained within the Eight Essential Elements, which promote deeper learning. The answers to the powerful questions below help reveal the level of PBL Design occurring in a teacher’s room:

How is instruction being driven by a challenging problem or question?

What is the teacher doing to stoke curiosity, sustain inquiry, and engage the students?

What actions are going on in the room that demonstrate lesson and activity authenticity?

What are the students doing that demonstrate voice and choice?

What are the kids doing to reflect, revise, and critique on their learning?

What are the kids doing to share information to express their thoughts and opinions to others?

What is a “Wall-to-Wall” PBL School?

In 2017, Goshen Post Elementary School opened as a PBL Design School. A “Wall-to-Wall” PBL school promotes deeper learning by expecting the eight essential elements to occur consistently during all instruction. PBL provides students a chance to apply their knowledge and skills to real world problems. Highly empowering and authentic lessons are expected on a daily basis.

In a “Wall-to-Wall” PBL School, PBL experiences are embedded in daily experiences, instead of infrequently occurring ‘events’ throughout the year. This is an instructional approach that enables students to master academic skills and content knowledge as the teacher facilitates and structures the learning around true inquiry. According to the Buck Institute, well designed effective learning has students responsible for designing, managing, and reflecting on their own learning. The teacher spends less time talking and more time facilitating student led learning.

Why should Harmony be considered for the “Wall-to-Wall” PBL School designation?

To best meet the needs of our specific student population, Harmony teachers have been learning and refining our understanding of the elements of PBL for the past four years. Greater than 95% of the staff is trained in the language, and more importantly, the practices of Project Based Learning. As such, the teaching staff is prepared for the next step: an official designation as a “Wall-to-Wall” PBL School.

Our students, facilitated by the teachers, now solve more problems, use higher levels of collaboration, conduct detailed research, and critically think through an instructional design process that best meets the needs of each learner. As we improve our PBL instructional strategies, we are continuing to refine our teaching

routines and expectations to make our lessons more interactive and interesting for students.

We believe when student ownership of learning is valued then students are motivated and engaged and will continue to strive for success, both academically and personally. We want our students to have 21st Century Skills that will empower them to effectively interact with and shape their world and future. Student feedback has indicated that group learning experiences, hands on activities, and working on a challenging problem or issue allows them to learn and operate at a deeper level.

How is a “Wall-to-Wall” PBL School Different from What My Child Currently is Doing?

Harmony has been transitioning to PBL for the past four years. This designation will mean that PBL is our main instructional approach, which teachers will implement continuously at different intensity levels instead of once per quarter. PBL projects will be ongoing throughout the year, but the essential elements of PBL will be used in classrooms daily. The metaphor of PBL as a dimmer light switch is commonly used. There will be times when the switch is flipped on and a class is fully engaged in a project, while at other times, the lesson can be delivered with only certain elements included, and the switch is dimmed. With PBL, teachers function more as facilitators and less as lecturers. A “Wall-to-Wall” PBL School designation also means students are going to experience content through a real-world challenge with the PBL Eight Essential Elements at the center of every lesson plan design. PBL encourages a shift from a teacher-centric model to a student-centric, learner driven approach. Moreover, PBL promotes the joy of teaching and learning while students master the curriculum.

What Will Work Spaces and Classes Look Like?

Work spaces will be set up for inquiry, collaboration, and exploration. While the focus remains on authentic tasks, PBL concepts are infused at different levels of intensity based on the phase of the project. PBL in a middle school with different teachers teaching different subjects (unlike elementary) will necessitate a shift in scheduling to allot for time for teachers and students to collaborate, communicate and create.

Teachers in all subjects can engage students with their content through PBL. Social Studies, for example, could treat history as an investigation, critically thinking about the past, forming opinions based on evidence, connecting past to present, and focusing on multiple perspectives. Mathematics could focus on their ability to research, investigate, and solve problems. The Media Center could be set up for work space and collaboration. Our current Advisory block will likely expand its focus to facilitate a transition to daily PBL practices/concepts such as collaboration, which is something students need to be taught. The school schedule will be prioritized to allow for naturally paired subjects to collaborate and plan together (Social Science and English / Math and Science).

What Kind of Student will a “Wall-to-Wall” PBL School Benefit?

PBL embraces all student types because students lead the direction of the instruction. Students start from where they are, develop a content related question or problem, and the research and study to find the answers. Along the way, they are continually critiquing, reflecting, redirecting, and revising their question(s) and answer(s). Teachers support students throughout this process in a myriad of ways. PBL involves many skills that all of our students will need time to learn but are necessary for them to lead productive adult lives. Collaboration, communication, and organization are all success skills that the staff will work to build and develop in students. Many students will benefit from the student-centered, inquiry based approach that increases motivation and engagement. Teachers will work with all students to facilitate their individual needs in a PBL setting. This individualized approach as well as student voice and choice will allow each student to find success. PBL emphasizes both content and success skills, student ownership and choice, making it something every student can engage in successfully.

Will Other Teaching Methods Be used for My Child Besides the Eight Essential Elements?

YES. PBL can incorporate all traditional teaching tools and methods, including lecture, text-books, and conventional assessments. Part of the teacher’s responsibility is to find the strategies that work best with each student. However, the nature of PBL demands that students spend the bulk of the project actively working in groups or individually to research the question and develop conclusions. The advantage of PBL is that it requires students to use specific skills,

such as collaboration, teamwork, time and task management, or presentation skills, to conclude a project successfully. These skills cannot be practiced or learned through traditional transmission. They remain, however, skills for success in the world and we have a responsibility to provide our students the chance to practice these skills in a safe and supportive learning environment.

Personalization is also part of PBL. With student voice and choice as a key essential element, students are continually making choices that impact their projects. From topic to inquiry to research to public product, students are making choices. Personalization is one of the many supports that are tools for learning. Harmony will fully integrate the Eight Essential Elements into PBL and include instructional strategies to support and assist in PBL success.