PBLWorks Research & Evidence Strategic Priority Plan 2019-2021

Executive Summary

~ WE KNOW PBL WORKS; NOW, WE HAVE TO SHOW IT WORKS ~

Introduction

This executive summary work to be done through 2021 to advance the PBLWorks Research & Evidence Strategic Priority. In alignment with PBLWorks’ vision, mission, beliefs, and strategic priorities in the PBLWorks Strategic Plan 2016-2020, this plan includes strategic and enabling actions for research and evidence to support PBLWorks’ ambitions to make a positive impact on students, teachers, and leaders using PBL. This plan is designed to guide and support implementation of strategic actions to advance the research and evidence strategic priority. As such, on an ongoing basis, the plan will be updated based on changing demands, resources, and learning; annually, progress will be analyzed and updates will be made for the subsequent fiscal year; and, in FY20, the plan will be realigned with the new strategic plan.

Vision

All students—no matter where they live or what their background— will have access to quality PBL to deepen their learning and achieve success in college, career, and life

Mission

Build the capacity of teachers to design and facilitate quality Project Based Learning and the capacity of school and system leaders to set the conditions for teachers to implement great projects with all students

Beliefs

● Transforms students by inspiring them to think differently about themselves as learners, collaborators, and leaders
● Prepares students for success in college, career, and life
● Leads students to master core academic content and builds success skills
● Advances educational equity and empowers youth furthest from opportunity
● Enables teachers to make a difference in their students’ lives

Aspirations

PBLWorks and our partners have a broad array of evidence that shows that PBLWorks services and PBL work for all students, including those who are furthest from opportunity. Key words that distinguish our work include:

Background. In 2017, the Research and Evidence Project Team engaged in a strategic planning process to design a strategic priority plan to orient and focus PBLWorks research
and evidence work for greater impact. The team gathered insights, risks, and research questions from the PBLWorks Management Team, Project Leadership Team, and key staff members; and external stakeholders, including PBLWorks Board members, national PBL experts, and PBL researchers. The team used PBLWORKS’s Research & Evidence Matrix, as a tool to choose priority focus areas.

Assumptions

- **Focusing research on PBLWorks services.** PBLWorks has high aspirations for transforming student experiences and outcomes through PBL, as expressed in PBLWORKS’s vision and beliefs. PBLWORKS’s mission is squarely focused on teachers and leaders who are within PBLWORKS’s professional services reach. Getting results for students through professional development is a challenge and not impossible. Research shows that professional development can result in student achievement (e.g., Yoon, 2007). PBLWorks will prioritize research that focuses on the effectiveness and efficacy of PBLWORKS’s professional services to gather evidence of what works, improve the quality of services, and inform partners and the field. PBLWorks will partner with other organizations (e.g., Lucas Education Research) focused on PBL research to support the dissemination and use of their findings.

- **Equity.** Broader and better evidence is needed to provide a holistic understanding of what students actually know and can do as a result of learning, in general, and specifically through PBL. The current practice of using composite scores (i.e., standardized state assessments or survey results) as shorthand for sizing up students, teachers, schools, and districts is a structural inequity that reduces students to a single number, obscuring their growth and progress in success skills that matter for college, career, and life. More importantly, this practice significantly hurts our most vulnerable students (i.e., students of color and students whose families are living in poverty) who lack equitable access to educational opportunities needed for higher level learning. PBLWorks will push the boundaries of what counts as evidence by testing out alternative authentic measures to show progress, success, and achievement; partnering with others who are committed to equity; and elevating this conversation nationally.

- **Actionable research and evidence.** Educators need actionable research and evidence for decision making, implementation, and continuous improvement. This is a top priority identified by PBLWorks staff members and partners. In collaboration with them, PBLWorks will designed easy to consume PBL research and evidence tools and resources tailored to partner needs.
**Strategic Action 1: Research the effectiveness and efficacy of PBLWorks professional services**

To deliver on the promise of our vision and mission, we will prioritize establishing an evidence base to show the effectiveness and efficacy of PBLWorks services. PBLWorks will continue to partner with external researchers to conduct effectiveness (i.e., Does it work?) and efficacy (i.e., Can it work?) of PBLWorks services at the student, teacher, leader, and school levels, focused on these high priority questions:

**Students**
1. What is the impact of PBLWorks district services on student outcomes (i.e., academic achievement and success skills)? [S1]
2. What number of projects do students need to engage in to achieve success skills? [S2]
3. To what extent do students who experience HQPBL (i.e., Intellectual Challenge and Accomplishment, Authenticity, Collaboration, Project Management, Reflection, Public Product) achieve success skills? [S3]

**Teachers**
1. To what extent do teachers change their mindsets and practices about PBL students furthest from opportunity as a result of participation in PBLWORKS’s services? [T1]
2. What types of project resources and supports best help teachers implement projects in their classrooms? [T2a]
   a. What other types of resources/supports are needed for teachers to implement projects aligned to PBLWorks Gold Standard Design Elements and Gold Standard Project Based Teaching Practices? [T2b]
3. To what extent do the projects that teachers implement in their classrooms align to PBLWorks Gold Standard Design Elements? [T3a]
   a. To Gold Standard Project Based Teaching Practices? [T3b]
4. To what extent do teachers who participate in PBLWORKS’s district services improve their teaching practices on national standards (i.e., Charlotte Danielson Framework for Teaching)? [T4]
5. To what extent, if any, does teachers’ understanding of adolescent development research and how it informs PBL effect teachers’ confidence and readiness to implement PBL in their classroom? [T5]

**Leaders**
1. To what extent do leaders change their mindsets and practices about PBL and students furthest from opportunity as a result of participation in PBLWorks district services? [L1]
2. To what extent do school leaders who participate in PBLWORKS’s district services improve their leadership practices on national standards (e.g., Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium [ISLLC])? [L2]

**Conditions**
1. What are the key conditions that need to be in place in schools and districts that enable teachers to design and facilitate projects aligned to PBLWorks Gold Standard Design Elements and Gold Standard Project Based Teaching Practices? [C1]
2. How does quality PBL scale and spread within and across schools? [C2a]
   a. What are the patterns of diffusion? [C2b]
   b. What system conditions enable or constrain teachers and leaders in scaling quality PBL? [C2c]

**Strategic Action 2: Create actionable evidence-based tools and resources for partners**

Non-profit organizations are considered by educators are viable sources of valid research (Education Perspectives Research Survey, 2018). One of the most pressing, and often urgent, needs expressed by educators in PBLWorks’s growing network is evidence that PBL works. In the next three years, PBLWorks will seek innovative ways to identify and generate valid and reliable evidence that pushes the current boundaries on what counts to show what students know and can do, using a broad array of evidence, including state assessment results and alternative authentic measures of student success that describe the whole child. The literature suggests that for research to be used in practice, it must be relevant and integrated into practice. PBLWorks will use human-centered design principles to design tools and resources tailored for the specific and unique needs of educational stakeholder groups: district and school leaders, parents, and teachers.

**Strategic Action 3: Build and grow partnerships with national researchers to scale PBL**

While PBL research is growing and more experimental studies are underway, the research is emerging and PBL is considered “promising and not proven.” The most recent PBL literature review (Condliffe, et al., 2017) points to key areas...
of research needed; specifically: (a) rigorous PBL research, specifically randomized control studies; (b) studies examining non-academic competencies; (c) studies that examine the effect of PBL on mathematics and literacy skills; and (d) efficacy of PBL on varying subgroups. PBLWorks will pursue purposeful partnerships with PBL researchers to support the widespread adoption of high quality PBL. For example, Lucas Education Research (LER), a non-profit focused on building an evidence base for PBL located nearby in Marin County, currently has 10 PBL research projects underway. PBLWorks will partner with LER and other national PBL researchers to glean insights, share their findings, and selectively engage in strategic research projects.

**Strategic Action 4: Use evidence to improve PBLWorks services continuously**

The need for continuous improvement is widely recognized by staff members as essential for achieving PBLWorks’s vision and fulfilling the mission. In this work, PBLWorks seeks to put in place a predictable and systematic process for analyzing, reflecting on, and making improvements from a broad array of evidence collected through research projects, PBL research conducted by partners, service surveys, and authentic artifacts.

**Enabling Actions: Create capacity to support strategic actions**

The growth and sustainability of research and evidence at PBLWorks is dependent on internal capacity and external support. As this work has historically been supported through grants from private foundations, PBLWorks will need to prepare to be best-situated to take advantage of funding opportunities that support Strategic Actions 1-4. Other enabling actions include increasing staffing and learning as well as designing new systems of support.