

# NC ACCESS BEST PRACTICES



Office of Charter Schools  
**NC ACCESS PROGRAM**  
NC Department of Public Instruction

## School Culture

## Student Engagement

### PBL- Engaging All Learners

#### Implementation Description

Alamance Community School (ACS) opened its doors in August 2020 with the intention of utilizing [Project Based Learning](#) (PBL) as a foundational practice. In the 2020-21 school year, the COVID-19 pandemic slowed the implementation of PBL, but during the 2021-22 school year all students have participated in three PBL standards based projects.

Leslie Paynter, the school's Managing Director, has over 20 years experience with PBL instruction and leading schools as they adopt this instructional approach. Early in her career, she explored the research of Katz and Chard which found that preschoolers learned better when they were engaged in real life problem solving (Katz & Chard, 1992). When Paynter applied these ideas at the elementary school level, she observed children with learning disabilities were inspired because they were able to contribute their own unique skill sets, and the collaborative nature of PBL sparked their interests. PBL benefits children of all ability levels, because they learn the content, while developing the "soft skills" employers desire in the workplace, such as collaboration, problem-solving, compromise, and flexibility. Research supports these observations and shows that student engagement increases when students explore a topic that is familiar to them and relevant to their own life experiences (Yun, 2000).

When Paynter prepared to open ACS in 2020, she hired a number of staff members with experience in PBL and others who were willing to collaborate and adopt this instructional approach. Due to COVID restrictions, the initial professional development in 2020-21 was delivered

#### About This School

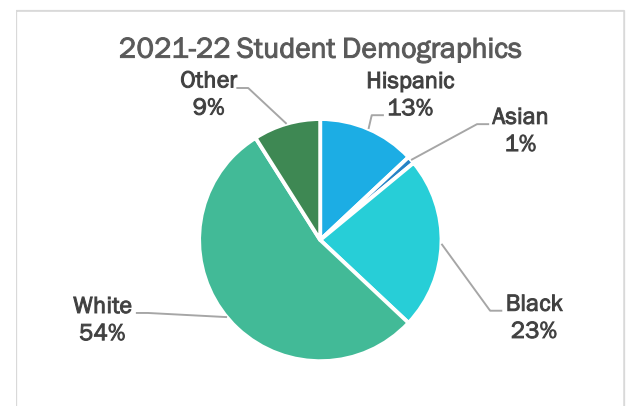
##### Alamance Community School

At Alamance Community School (ACS), we believe that teaching empathy and our children's social/emotional development is just as important as their academic development. The use of Responsive Classroom strategies allow our students to develop self-control, build their sense of community, and gain academic skills and knowledge. We embrace Project Based Learning (PBL), a rich educational experience in which children are engaged in meaningful work that matters to them through tasks and inquiries designed to meet educational standards.

**Year School Opened:** 2020-21

**Grant Awarded:** 2020-21

**Initial Grade Levels Served:** K-3



**% ED Student Population:** 16%

**Urbanicity:** Rural / Haw River, NC

**Persons in Poverty (Alamance County)<sup>5</sup>:** 15.1%

virtually. Also, students were not meeting in person, so it limited the ability to truly implement PBL that year.

Fortunately, the 2021-22 school year allowed students to return to in person learning, and staff was able to participate in face-to-face professional development. Therefore, all grade levels planned and implemented PBL. Teachers received [professional development](#) and coaching at the beginning of the year as they created a standards based project which incorporated the school theme of “Building Community.” Training continues throughout the year during early release Wednesdays and targets a variety of topics, such as Critique, offering appropriate feedback, based on the work of [Ron Berger](#), utilizing PBL process procedures, and facilitating a collaborative, student-driven learning environment. Part of this work helps teachers realize that a final product is an expected outcome for each project, but the collaborative pathway and process students take to get to that product can be far more telling than the product itself. Therefore, it is essential that all project work be completed at school, so the teacher can scaffold and assess each student's contributions and collaboration. Teachers at each grade level collaboratively plan the three PBL units using a school-wide [common template](#). While these units target science and social studies standards and are implemented



during the social studies/science block, math and ELA standards are embedded throughout the unit. Students are often found analyzing or graphing data, and reading or writing as they research and discover during their PBL process. “Research shows that PBL can promote student learning and may be more effective than traditional instruction in social studies, science, mathematics, and literacy” (Kingston, 2018).

Project themes offer a wide range of learning experiences for students. For example, first graders studied plants and created a community garden complete with seating so it can be used as an outdoor learning space. Teachers constantly reflect on these themes and modify them as needed to ensure they are well suited to the students they serve.

## Results

Since this is the first year of implementation, and there is limited baseline data from last year, there is no quantitative data to report at this time. However, teachers report increased student engagement during the PBL process, especially with ED students.

*“Seeing students excited to navigate their own learning through project work has reenergized us as teachers. When we saw our students researching to find out more about their ideas, testing their theories, and collaborating to create their projects and presentations, we were reminded of why we became educators.” -Wendy Lane and Stephanie Kinley*

Teachers also report that while the initial PBL planning is quite time intensive, their implementation is simply “more fun” for both teachers and students than traditional instruction.

## Challenges

While the delay in face-to-face training was a challenge during the 2020-21 school year, the 2021-22 school year enabled professional development to occur. Additionally, teachers were able to collaborate as they planned units, and students could work together as they engaged with the PBL challenge.

During the initial year of full implementation, it is always a challenge to ensure that everyone implements with fidelity. One common concern is ensuring all project work is completed at school to prioritize the process of learning, rather than the final product.

## Future Modifications

Each year the goal is to increase the fidelity and consistency of PBL implementation across the school. Teachers will receive ongoing professional development as they refine their practice. Currently the school is planning a training with [PBLWorks](#) in the Summer of 2023.

## Critical Components

### Getting Started

In order to begin implementing PBL, it is essential to have buy-in from the school leadership so they are able to provide the necessary support and hold all staff accountable.

It is also important to hire staff with aligned vision, values, and philosophy and who prioritize collaboration with their colleagues as this is an essential part of PBL both for teachers and students.

### Ongoing Supports

Ongoing professional development and a supportive administration empowers teachers to continually improve their practice as they implement their PBL instructional strategies.

## Equity Connections

While education has been referred to as “the great equalizer” in addressing poverty, the reality is that disadvantaged students frequently receive a different, often lower quality, education than their same age affluent peers. The lessons are typically teacher driven and focused on rote memory of basic skills, rather than lessons which are student centered and require high levels of questioning aligned with Bloom’s Taxonomy. One study compared a traditional teacher directed lesson with a project based learning unit at a high poverty school, where more than 90% of the student population lived in poverty, and 100% were an ethnic minority. The researchers found that more learning goals were addressed with project based learning. Additionally, the children used higher academic vocabulary and were more descriptive in their explanations after the PBL unit (Dresdan & Lee, 2007). ACS’s commitment to Project Based Learning benefits students in poverty by providing them with rich opportunities to problem solve and ultimately receive an educational experience equitable to that of their peers.

## Research

1. Dresdan, J. & Lee, K. (March 2007). “*The Effects of Project Work in a First-Grade Classroom: A Little Goes a Long Way*”. Accessed May 19,2022. Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/26572455\\_The\\_Effects\\_of\\_Project\\_Work\\_in\\_a\\_First-Grade\\_Classroom\\_A\\_Little\\_Goes\\_a\\_Long\\_Way](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/26572455_The_Effects_of_Project_Work_in_a_First-Grade_Classroom_A_Little_Goes_a_Long_Way)

2. Katz, L. & Chard, S. (February, 1992). "*The Project Approach*". Accessed May 13, 2022. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED340518.pdf>
3. Kingston, S. (2018). "*Project Based Learning & Student Achievement: What Does the Research Tell Us?*". PBL Evidence Matters. 1(1), 1-11. PBL EVIDENCE MATTERS VOLUME 1, NO. 1 Accessed May 12, 2022. Retrieved from [https://www.pblworks.org/sites/default/files/2019-01/PBL\\_Evidence\\_Matters\\_Volume\\_1.pdf](https://www.pblworks.org/sites/default/files/2019-01/PBL_Evidence_Matters_Volume_1.pdf)
4. Yun, E. (November, 2000). "*The Project Approach as a Way of Making Life Meaningful in the Classroom*". Accessed on May 12, 2022. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED470896>
5. United States Census Bureau, "*Quick Facts North Carolina*". Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/NC/PST045219>