

# 25 Project-Based Learning Examples

Driving questions, real products, and a one-page planning template you can fill in before you commit a single class period.

Most lists of “project ideas” hand you a title and leave you to invent the hard part. This one gives you the driving question, the public product, why the project actually clears the bar for project-based learning rather than being a craft activity with a rubric, and the standards territory it lives in. Twenty-five projects across five subject areas, all built for middle and high school.

The planning template at the back is the part most teachers tell me they are missing. It is one page. If you cannot fill it in, the project is not ready — and finding that out at a desk is much cheaper than finding it out in week three.

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|----------------------------------------|------------|
| English Language Arts                  | 4 projects |
| Social Studies and History             | 4 projects |
| Science                                | 4 projects |
| Mathematics                            | 4 projects |
| Cross-Curricular and Elective Projects | 9 projects |
| Planning template                      | 1 page     |

## How to use this

- Pick the driving question first. If it has a single correct answer that a student could look up, it is a research assignment, not a project.
- Decide who sees the finished product besides you. That one decision changes student effort more than any rubric ever has.
- Fill in the planning template before you announce anything to students.
- Start with one project, one unit. Do not convert your whole course at once.

## 01 The Community Oral History Archive

Grades 6-8 • English Language Arts

**Driving question:** *Whose stories in our community are not being told?*

Students identify community members whose experiences are underrepresented—veterans, immigrants, retired workers, elders—and conduct recorded interviews using oral history protocols. They transcribe, edit, and publish the interviews as an online or physical archive donated to the local library or historical society.

**Why this is PBL.** Students choose their subjects, conduct sustained research, practice interview and writing skills, revise based on feedback from both their teacher and the interview subjects, and produce a public product with a real audience and lasting value. A book report does not do any of that.

**Standards territory.** Speaking and listening, narrative and informational writing, primary source analysis, digital literacy.

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## 02 The Op-Ed Campaign

Grades 9-12 • English Language Arts

**Driving question:** *What issue in our school or community deserves a public argument?*

Students research a local issue—school policy, city budget allocation, environmental concern, public health—draft an opinion editorial, workshop it through peer critique and revision cycles, and submit it to a local newspaper, school publication, or community blog. The goal is actual publication, not a grade.

**Why this is PBL.** The audience is real. The stakes are real. Students must build an evidence-based argument strong enough to survive an editor's review. Revision matters because rejection is possible.

**Standards territory.** Argumentative writing, evidence evaluation, audience awareness, media literacy.

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## 03 The Podcast Series on Student Identity

Grades 7-10 • English Language Arts

**Driving question:** *What does it mean to grow up in this place, at this time?*

Students plan, script, record, edit, and publish a multi-episode podcast exploring aspects of adolescent identity—culture, language, family expectations, pressure, belonging. Each episode requires research, interviews, narrative structure, and production quality good enough for public release.

**Why this is PBL.** Students control the content, format, and production decisions. The public product (a published podcast) creates accountability that a classroom presentation cannot replicate.

**Standards territory.** Narrative techniques, speaking and listening, research, digital media production.

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## 04 The Literary Magazine With an Editorial Board

Grades 6-12 • English Language Arts

**Driving question:** *What original writing and art from our school deserves a public audience?*

Students run every aspect of a literary magazine: soliciting submissions, forming an editorial board, establishing selection criteria, editing accepted pieces with authors, designing layout, and distributing the finished publication. The teacher advises. The students decide.

**Why this is PBL.** Editorial decision-making, quality control, collaboration, revision, and publication for a real audience. This is not a creative writing assignment turned in for a grade—it is a functioning publication.

**Standards territory.** Writing across genres, editing, design, collaboration, project management.

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### SOCIAL STUDIES AND HISTORY

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## 05 The Local Policy Investigation

Grades 8-12 • Social Studies and History

**Driving question:** *How does one local policy affect real people in our community?*

Students select a local government policy—zoning, school discipline, curfew laws, water usage regulations—research its history, interview affected community members and officials, analyze data, and present findings and recommendations at a city council meeting, school board session, or community forum.

**Why this is PBL.** The audience is a decision-making body. Students produce evidence for people who can act on it. That changes how seriously students treat research and revision.

**Standards territory.** Civic engagement, primary and secondary source analysis, data interpretation, persuasive communication.

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## 06 The Historical Marker Project

Grades 6-9 • Social Studies and History

**Driving question:** *What happened here that people should know about?*

Students research a local site with historical significance—a building, intersection, park, or neighborhood—write the text for an official historical marker, and submit a proposal to the local historical society or city government. The proposal includes a researched essay defending why the site deserves recognition.

**Why this is PBL.** The product has a real approval process. Students must build an argument backed by primary sources convincing enough for adults outside the school to accept. The stakes are authentic because the marker could actually be installed.

**Standards territory.** Historical research, primary source analysis, persuasive and informational writing, civic participation.

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## 07 The Immigration Documentary

Grades 9-12 • Social Studies and History

**Driving question:** *How has immigration shaped our community's economy, culture, and identity?*

Students research immigration patterns in their region, conduct interviews with immigrants and longtime residents, analyze census and economic data, and produce a short documentary screened at a community event or submitted to a student film festival.

**Why this is PBL.** Students investigate a complex, relevant issue using multiple sources and perspectives. The documentary requires sustained inquiry, revision, and presentation to a public audience. Sensitivity to real people's stories adds ethical weight the classroom rarely provides.

**Standards territory.** Historical analysis, geography, economics, media production, ethical research practices.

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## 08 The Election Simulation With Real Data

Grades 7-12 • Social Studies and History

**Driving question:** *How do campaigns actually persuade voters, and what role does evidence play?*

Students research real candidates and ballot measures using primary sources—voting records, financial disclosures, policy statements—develop informed positions, create campaign materials, hold structured debates, and vote. The simulation ends with a published voter guide distributed to school families.

**Why this is PBL.** The voter guide is a real product for a real audience. Students must evaluate claims critically rather than parrot slogans. The project connects classroom learning to democratic participation.

**Standards territory.** Government, media literacy, argumentative writing, data analysis, civic responsibility.

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## 09 The Water Quality Investigation

Grades 6-9 • Science

**Driving question:** *Is the water in our community safe, and how do we know?*

Students test water from local sources—taps, wells, creeks, fountains—using scientific protocols. They analyze results, compare them to EPA standards, and present their findings to the school board, city water department, or a community meeting. If results are concerning, students draft a formal letter to the appropriate authority.

**Why this is PBL.** Students collect real data, follow scientific methods, and present findings to an audience that may actually respond. The data is not hypothetical. If the water tests badly, students learn what it means to report uncomfortable truths backed by evidence.

**Standards territory.** Scientific investigation, data collection and analysis, environmental science, technical writing, civic engagement.

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## 10 The School Energy Audit

Grades 7-12 • Science

**Driving question:** *How much energy does our school waste, and what would it cost to fix?*

Students audit the school's energy consumption—lighting, heating, cooling, electronics—calculate waste, research solutions, estimate costs and savings, and present a formal proposal to the principal or school board. The proposal includes a cost-benefit analysis and implementation timeline.

**Why this is PBL.** The data is real. The audience has budget authority. Students learn that persuading decision-makers requires more than good intentions—it requires numbers, evidence, and a realistic plan.

**Standards territory.** Physics (energy), mathematics (data analysis, financial literacy), environmental science, persuasive communication.

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## 11 The Biodiversity Survey

Grades 6-10 • Science

**Driving question:** *What species live in our schoolyard or local park, and what does that tell us about ecosystem health?*

Students conduct a systematic biodiversity survey using transects, quadrats, and species identification. They compile data, compare results to historical records or regional databases, and publish findings through a report to the local parks department or a citizen-science platform like iNaturalist.

**Why this is PBL.** Students contribute real data to real scientific databases. Their work has value beyond the classroom. The survey requires sustained fieldwork, accurate data collection, and scientifically defensible conclusions.

**Standards territory.** Ecology, data collection, species identification, scientific writing, environmental stewardship.

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## 12 The Public Health Campaign

Grades 9-12 • Science

**Driving question:** *What health issue in our community needs better public information?*

Students research a local health concern—teen vaping, nutrition access, mental health stigma, sleep deprivation—analyze data, consult local health professionals, and design and distribute an evidence-based awareness campaign. Products might include infographics, social media content, presentations to younger students, or informational materials for a community health fair.

**Why this is PBL.** The campaign targets a real audience with real health stakes. Students must verify claims, cite sources, and design communication that actually reaches people—not just earns a grade.

**Standards territory.** Health science, biology, statistics, graphic design, persuasive communication, media literacy.

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## 13 The Small Business Financial Plan

Grades 9–12 • Mathematics

**Driving question:** *Could our business idea actually survive its first year?*

Students develop a business concept, research market conditions, create financial projections using algebra and statistics, and present their business plan to a panel of local business owners or entrepreneurs. The panel provides real feedback on whether the numbers hold up.

**Why this is PBL.** The math serves a real purpose—convincing skeptical adults that the numbers work. Students cannot hide behind procedures. They must defend their assumptions, explain their models, and revise when challenged.

**Standards territory.** Algebra, statistics, financial literacy, functions, modeling, oral presentation.

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## 14 The School Redesign Proposal

Grades 7–10 • Mathematics

**Driving question:** *If we could redesign one space in our school, what would the data say we should change?*

Students survey peers and staff, collect usage data, measure dimensions, create scale drawings or digital models, calculate material costs, and propose a redesign to the administration. The proposal includes blueprints, a budget, and evidence that the redesign addresses a real need.

**Why this is PBL.** The math—geometry, measurement, ratio, budgeting—serves a visible purpose. The audience (administration) has the authority to act on the proposal. Students see whether their calculations survive adult scrutiny.

**Standards territory.** Geometry, measurement, ratio and proportion, data analysis, scale drawing, budgeting.

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## 15 The Statistical Investigation of School Data

Grades 8–12 • Mathematics

**Driving question:** *What does our school's data actually tell us about fairness, access, or student experience?*

Students obtain anonymized school data—attendance patterns, discipline referrals, course enrollment, extracurricular participation—and conduct a statistical analysis looking for patterns, disparities, or trends. They present findings and recommendations to school leadership.

**Why this is PBL.** The data is real and the findings might be uncomfortable. Students practice statistical reasoning on questions that matter to their own school community. Presenting to administration makes accuracy and honesty non-negotiable.

**Standards territory.** Statistics and probability, data representation, bias and sampling, ethical data use, persuasive communication.

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## 16 The Community Mapping Project

Grades 6–8 • Mathematics

**Driving question:** *What resources does our neighborhood have—and what is missing?*

Students map community assets—parks, clinics, grocery stores, bus stops, libraries—using measurement, coordinate systems, and data collection. They identify gaps in access, calculate distances and travel times, and present their findings to a community organization or neighborhood association.

**Why this is PBL.** Mathematics becomes a tool for understanding equity and access. The map and analysis serve a real community organization, and students must defend their data collection methods.

**Standards territory.** Coordinate geometry, measurement, ratios, data analysis, geography, civic awareness.

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### CROSS-CURRICULAR AND ELECTIVE PROJECTS

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## 17 The School Podcast Network

Grades 6–12 • Cross-Curricular and Elective Projects

**Driving question:** *What conversations should our school community be having?*

Students pitch, produce, and publish regular podcast episodes covering school news, student perspectives, interviews with staff and community members, and student-reported stories. An editorial team manages content review, scheduling, and quality standards.

**Why this is PBL.** Students run a real media operation with real deadlines, audience feedback, and editorial standards. They must balance free expression with responsibility and accuracy—skills that no worksheet teaches.

**Standards territory.** Speaking and listening, research, writing, media production, journalism ethics, project management



## 18 The Mentorship Curriculum

Grades 9–12 • Cross-Curricular and Elective Projects

**Driving question:** *What do incoming freshmen actually need to know, and how should they learn it?*

Older students design and deliver a mentorship program for incoming ninth graders. They research transition challenges, develop lesson plans, create resources, facilitate sessions, collect feedback, and revise the program based on results. The final product is a reusable curriculum guide for future mentors.

**Why this is PBL.** Students design instruction for a real audience and measure whether it works. The responsibility is genuine— younger students are depending on them . Revision is based on real feedback from real participants, not a teacher's rubric alone.

**Standards territory.** Research, instructional design, leadership, communication, data collection, program evaluation.

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## 19 The Community Art Installation

Grades 6–12 • Cross-Curricular and Elective Projects

**Driving question:** *What message should our school send to our community through public art?*

Students research public art, develop a concept, pitch it to school or city officials, design and create the installation, and manage the project from proposal through completion. The installation is displayed publicly—in the school, a local business, a community center, or a public space.

**Why this is PBL.** The approval process, budget constraints, material limitations, and public audience make this project authentic in ways classroom art projects rarely are. Students must persuade, plan, execute, and accept public reaction.

**Standards territory.** Visual arts, research, proposal writing, project management, budgeting, community engagement.

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## 20 The Bilingual Community Resource Guide

Grades 7-12 • Cross-Curricular and Elective Projects

**Driving question:** *What essential information in our community is not available in the languages families actually speak?*

Students identify critical community resources—health services, legal aid, school enrollment, emergency contacts, transportation—and create a bilingual or multilingual guide. They verify accuracy with service providers, translate carefully, design for clarity, and distribute through schools, churches, clinics, or community organizations.

**Why this is PBL.** The product fills a real gap. Families who speak languages other than English will actually use this guide. Students must verify information, translate accurately, and design for people who need clear communication—not for a grade.

**Standards territory.** World languages, research, informational writing, design, community service, cultural competency.

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## 21 The Career Investigation and Job Shadow Report

Grades 8-12 • Cross-Curricular and Elective Projects

**Driving question:** *What does this career actually look like on a regular Tuesday?*

Students research a career field, arrange a job shadow or informational interview with a professional, observe and document the daily realities of the work, and produce a detailed report comparing their expectations to reality. Reports are compiled into a career resource available to other students.

**Why this is PBL.** Students interact with real professionals, confront the gap between expectations and reality, and produce a resource other students will actually consult. The job shadow requires initiative, communication, and follow-through outside the classroom.

**Standards territory.** Research, informational writing, career readiness, professional communication, self-assessment.

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## 22 The School Improvement Proposal

Grades 6-12 • Cross-Curricular and Elective Projects

**Driving question:** *What is one thing about our school we could change with evidence and a plan?*

Students identify a school problem—cafeteria waste, hallway congestion, library usage, schedule concerns—collect data, research solutions from other schools, calculate costs, and deliver a formal proposal to administration. The proposal follows a standard format with an executive summary, evidence section, implementation plan, and budget.

**Why this is PBL.** The audience makes real decisions. Students learn that complaining is easy but proposing evidence-based solutions is hard. If the proposal is good enough, the school might actually implement it.

**Standards territory.** Research, data analysis, persuasive writing, financial literacy, problem-solving, civic participation.

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## 23 The Climate Action Plan

Grades 9-12 • Cross-Curricular and Elective Projects

**Driving question:** *What can our school realistically do to reduce its carbon footprint in the next two years?*

Students calculate the school's carbon footprint, research reduction strategies, analyze costs and feasibility, consult with facilities staff, and present a phased action plan to school leadership. The plan includes measurable targets, timelines, responsible parties, and progress indicators.

**Why this is PBL.** The word "realistically" does a lot of work. Students cannot propose fantasy solutions. They must account for budgets, building codes, contracts, staff capacity, and political will. The constraints are what make it authentic.

**Standards territory.** Environmental science, chemistry, mathematics, economics, project management, persuasive communication.

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## 24 The Peer Mediation Training Program

Grades 7-12 • Cross-Curricular and Elective Projects

**Driving question:** *How can students help resolve conflicts fairly and reduce the need for adult intervention?*

Students research conflict resolution, restorative practices, and mediation techniques. They design a training program, pilot it with volunteers, collect data on outcomes, revise based on results, and present the finished program to administration for adoption. Trained mediators then serve the school community.

**Why this is PBL.** Students create a lasting program that changes how their school handles conflict. The work is sustained over weeks, requires research and revision, and produces a public product that affects real people. Success is measured by whether the program actually works—not by a rubric score.

**Standards territory.** Psychology, communication, research, program design, leadership, data analysis, social-emotional learning.

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## 25 The Local History Walking Tour

Grades 6-10 · Cross-Curricular and Elective Projects

***Driving question: What stories does our neighborhood tell if you know where to look?***

Students research the history of locations within walking distance of the school—buildings, monuments, former businesses, sites of historical events. They write informative scripts, create a mapped route, design signage or a digital guide, and lead public tours for families, community members, or younger students.

**Why this is PBL.** The walking tour is a real product for a real audience. Students must verify historical claims using primary sources, write for non-expert audiences, design for clarity, and perform publicly. A bad tour gets noticed. A good tour changes how people see their neighborhood.

**Standards territory.** Historical research, primary source analysis, informational writing, geography, public speaking, design.

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# Project Planning Template

Fill this in before you announce the project. If a box will not fill, that box is the problem to solve first.

## Driving question

Open-ended. No single lookup answer. Written in student language.

## Final product

What exists at the end that did not exist before.

## Real audience

Who sees it besides me — and when do students find that out?

## Length

Class periods, start date, end date.

## Skills built

Beyond content: which transferable skills does this actually build?

## Checkpoints

Dates I check progress, and what I am looking at each time.

## Assessment

What I grade, and what portion is process versus product.

## Modifications

For students who need more scaffolding, and for those who need more room.

## What could sink this

The realistic failure mode, and my plan for it.

elevatethenorm.com

## Where this came from

Elevate the Norm is written and edited by Clay Shumate, a secondary classroom teacher with a B.A. in History and an M.Ed. in Secondary Education. The site covers project-based learning, student agency and responsibility, and classroom culture for grades 6-12 — research paired with what actually survives contact with a real room.

This packet is free. Print it, copy it, hand it to your department, put it in a new teacher's mailbox. The only ask is that the credit line stays on the page.

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## **elevatethenorm.com**

Full write-ups for all 25 projects, including classroom detail this packet does not have room for, are on the site.

**elevatethenorm.com**