

Increasing Knowledge and Skills in this Digital, Global Era with Scott McLeod



Project-based learning at scale

Most schools that dive deep into project-based learning tend to be smaller charter or magnet schools that have the ability to hire new educators and create new schedules and instructional paradigms from scratch. Bettendorf Middle School, in contrast, has been around a while and often resembles other large middle schools across the nation. With over 1,100 students and about 70 instructional staff, a move to a project-based learning paradigm meant shifting legacy structures and mindsets rather than creating from a blank slate. Nonetheless, the school took up the challenge ...

Exposed to some faculty from High Tech High a few years back, the school decided to go all in. Most of the staff now have visited the original High Tech High campus in California and the decision was made several years ago to incorporate project-based learning into every Bettendorf Middle School course at least twice a year. Projects at the school range from two to 12 weeks. Teachers put together proposals and then have to pitch their projects to a panel of teacher peers AND students. Together they all use Bettendorf's project tuning protocol to make the projects meaningful, relevant, and of high quality. All projects incorporate essential curriculum standards to ensure that students are addressing critical learning outcomes. Students hold community exhibitions twice per year to show their learning.

Projects are numerous and varied. For instance, an English teacher had her students investigate the question, *What is essential?*, which ultimately led to the creation of three separate 9' x 15' tiny houses. Students designed, built, and decorated the homes themselves and incorporated essential ELA standards into their work as they wrote and reflected about their attempts to do various tasks within the homes. In another class, students worked with a local senior citizens home to interview residents, write biographies, and create an abstract piece of art that reflected each interviewee's life. As you can imagine, the unveiling and gifting of these student-created products to the residents was incredibly moving and emotional.

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Another project involved creating a community garden. Students worked with a local landscape company to create 10 garden plots, write bylaws, create logos, engage in marketing, and build support structures, such as a shed. Every garden plot was quickly rented out by the community. Students in another course investigated the question, *What is true survival?* Although that question initially revolved around outdoor survival techniques, by project's end student investigations and writing had turned toward such diverse topics as mountaineering, homelessness, food insecurity, and divorce.

Most of this instructional planning, assessment, and standards coverage work is addressed within traditional professional learning communities (PLCs), with some additional assistance from the school's three instructional coaches. The emphasis is on robust, hands-on and minds-on work and on developing powerful essential questions to frame students' learning.

Bettendorf Middle School is moving forward in exciting new directions, including a recent global project involving the essential question, *Is revolution justified?*, that involved 1,000 participating students from nine different schools around the world. *What could you do at YOUR traditional school?*

Upcoming events

- The annual Iowa 1:1 Institute will be in Des Moines on April 5 and 6. More info at iowaltol.com.
- The Student Voices Matter Rally at the Iowa State Capitol is April 5 and is a student-driven statewide political rally in support of public education. Hope your students participate! More info at iowasli.org.

As always, stay in touch at dr.scott.mcleod@gmail.com, 707-722-7853, or [@mcleod!](https://twitter.com/mcleod)

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