Success Academy’s project-based learning units inspire students to become experts in a fascinating subject. Through real-world experiences and immersive lessons and activities, learners develop literacy skills and become strong and curious thinkers.

**OVERVIEW**

The Robertson Center at Success Academy is where educational thinkers and changemakers come together to advance learning for all children. Through programming and content, they aim to amplify what’s working in Success Academy’s K–12 schools, share lessons learned about creating strong education communities, and create space to learn with external peers. Project-based learning (PBL) is a critical component of Success Academy’s elementary school literacy curriculum and supports the development of reading, writing, and verbal communication. Through projects, scholars engage with learning in ways that connect academic skills and knowledge to the real world.

Success Academy’s PBL units are designed for scholars to immerse themselves in one topic from a cross-disciplinary perspective. During PBL lessons, scholars read rigorous shared texts, conduct their own research, and explore topics in their local community. At the end of each project, scholars present their creations and learnings to friends and families.

The Robertson Center has published 10 of Success Academy’s PBL units, and more than 30 elementary schools are currently implementing these lessons as part of their literacy curriculum. The Robertson Center currently offers services around direct implementation as well as professional development webinars to support leaders and teachers.
**What Makes This Model Innovative?**

**Rigorous Learning**
Project-based learning challenges scholars by setting rigorous learning objectives. Scholars read complex texts and answer essential questions as they gain content knowledge and make progress on their projects.

**Relevance**
Project-based learning offers exposure to real-world topics and problems. Scholars go on relevant field studies to experience and learn about the world and their community.

**Active Self-Direction**
Project-based learning encourages self-direction and ownership. Scholars guide their learning and engage in self-reflection on their progress.

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**DESIGN**

**Goals**
Project-based learning at Success Academy has clear intended outcomes for scholar learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curiosity and Exploration</th>
<th>Scholars develop curiosity about the world and how it works and actively seek out knowledge.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Academic Knowledge &amp; Skills</td>
<td>Scholars demonstrate proficiency in reading and content-specific knowledge and develop inquiry skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Regulation Habits &amp; Skills</td>
<td>Scholars master habits such as time management, self-monitoring, and self-reflection.</td>
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**Experience**
Across all PBL units, lessons are grounded in guiding questions that offer developmentally appropriate challenges and opportunities for inquiry and self-direction. Scholars engage in a variety of relevant activities to support their projects.

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Lesson Launch

Scholars begin their lesson with a whole-class launch where the teacher engages the class in the day's work through a guiding question. An engaging launch can happen in many ways, but all share a few qualities. Launches should:

- Pique scholars’ curiosity and keep their attention.
- Leverage prior knowledge or engage their personal experiences.
- Relate back to or foreshadow the lesson's purpose through a guiding question.

Launches are often quick—about five to seven minutes—and build on the content from the previous day, which helps scholars situate the day's learning. Through launches, scholars become interested in how lessons, guiding questions, and other class activities build on one another over the course of the unit. Making these connections is an essential component of mastering necessary content and skills.

For example, in the kindergarten “Farm to Table” unit, scholars spend 10 minutes exploring what can be found on a farm (or not!) by sorting images into a T-chart. In the third-grade “Iroquois and Lenape” unit, scholars are given a map and are told that the Iroquois and Lenape were the first people to inhabit the NYC region. With this new knowledge, they turn and talk to their partners to discuss what they already know. 

Read to Learn

Scholars gain content knowledge by engaging in independent reading time, read-alouds, and whole-class discussions around a series of shared texts—something every scholar reads at the same time.

Each PBL unit recommends texts for students to explore in order to gain the background or contextual knowledge necessary to work through the unit’s projects. Teachers decide which texts to highlight and how scholars will engage with them depending on the skills and needs of each scholar. The most common modes of engaging with shared texts are:

- **Read-Alouds:** Scholars lead a read-aloud of specific portions of a shared text, pausing to answer questions, expand their thinking, and make connections.
- **Independent Reading:** Scholars spend time reading and annotating the shared text on their own.
- **Small Groups:** Scholars are divided into groups with heterogeneous skills where they share read-aloud time and are guided by discussion questions.
- **Targeted Teaching:** The teacher pushes into independent reading time to support scholars 1:1 as needed. This is often preplanned, and the teacher supports with scaffolded comprehension questions.
For example, in the second-grade “Birds” unit, scholars engage with illustrative texts that bring learning to life. In this unit, scholars explore fiction and nonfiction texts to learn about how birds fly, their habits and skills, birdwatching as a hobby, and more.  

**Writing and Journaling**

Scholars spend time practicing their writing by responding to guiding questions or journaling. In order for scholars to engage with knowledge independently, project-based learning lessons promote writing every day. This activity supports scholars to process information and synthesize understandings on their own. It can also serve as a way to evaluate scholars’ reading comprehension and reasoning skills.

Scholars often respond to creative or personal prompts that extend their thinking or encourage them to transfer knowledge across experiences. Reflecting on content personally through journaling reflections helps keep the content sticky and relevant. Responding to targeted questions helps teachers check scholars for accuracy and understanding of critical content knowledge.

The two common writing formats that complement each project are:

- **Free-form Journaling**: Scholars spend time reflecting on the day’s activities. They often write about their experiences with connections, ideas, or challenges related to the content or the project.

- **Written Responses**: Scholars spend dedicated time responding to a content-specific question posed by the teacher (usually the day’s guiding question). This exercise acts as an individual check-for-understanding around content and writing skills.

For example, in the third-grade “Immigration” unit, scholars keep journals for their research and writing. Throughout this unit, scholars hone their writing and comprehension skills by creating a class glossary of the most important immigration terms. This unit culminates in each scholar researching, writing, and publishing their own “expert book” on a topic related to immigration of their choosing.  

**Project Work Time**

Scholars complete a series of projects during a single PBL unit, often spending multiple lessons working on the tasks that move one project forward. Every project builds on previous knowledge and skills and encourages scholars to get creative while grounded in facts and content-specific information. These projects often engage various modes of learning, including building and/or making, writing, and crafting. The goal of these is to provide learners with different ways of demonstrating their learning while honing their creativity.
Whether working in groups or independently, scholars engage in a few different activities to complete each of their projects:

- Scholars spend time planning their project work time. This can look like setting up daily to-dos, dividing up tasks among group members, or even evaluating their progress toward their final goal. Teachers can offer examples and provide daily support or check-ins.
- Scholars work together or independently to conduct research on the project, depending on the expected outcome. Research can range from reviewing information online to looking closely at learnings within shared texts or interviewing community members.
- Scholars spend time creating and polishing their work in order to showcase them to their friends and family during the PBL Museum or Showcase. This can look like building a suspension bridge to explore what building a real bridge might entail (in grade 3) to touching different types of flour and jotting observations to learn about the ingredients that make up different breads (in kindergarten).

For example, in the first-grade “Arctic” unit, scholars engage in projects and experiments that allow them to apply what they’ve learned. Activities include experiments to better understand why animals hibernate, building igloos to better understand adaptation and shelter in the Arctic, and working as a class to create a visual representation of their findings. 

Field Studies

Scholars take their learning beyond the classroom and explore local and regional places related to their projects’ content. Each PBL unit contains three to five field study learning experiences that can range in time from 45 minutes to half-day trips.

These field study experiences bring learning to life. Field studies help scholars relate their learnings to the real world while exploring the contexts of local landmarks and important places around their neighborhoods or places nearby.

Explore some sample field studies: Kindergarten, Unit 7: Beyond the Baking  Grade 2, Unit 3 Field Studies: Brooklyn Bridge  Grade 4, Unit 3 Field Studies: The American Revolution

PBL Museum and Showcases

Scholars share their PBL experiences by hosting a joyful celebration of their learnings.
The culminating exhibition showcases scholars’ project work and all that they’ve learned about their topics. Scholars should spend time preparing to present to museum visitors. Teachers should work with students to ensure that work is accurate, neat, and detailed.

On the day of the museum, families and community members are invited to view scholars’ academic work, guests are guided by their scholars on a tour of the projects so everyone can share their excitement and learn from their expertise about the topic.

Supporting Structures

Implementing Success Academy’s PBL units will require changes to a few supporting structures.

Success Academy’s PBL curriculum is grounded in rigorous learning objectives and requires a scholar-centered approach to learning.

Curiosity and inquiry are at the heart of the learning objectives for each PBL unit. Scholars’ content knowledge and skills are grounded in challenging yet achievable learning objectives. Scholars engage with complex guiding questions that help scaffold their discovery and understanding of the content. By making choices about their projects, asking questions, and sharing ideas with peers and adults, scholars develop self-direction skills and habits.

[Study Journals/Writing Suggestions][Thinking Chart Template][Sample Vocabulary List]

Successful project-based learning requires fostering productive adult mindsets around scholar-led learning.

Teachers must hold a growth-mindset approach to teaching and learning and believe that all scholars are capable and deserving of success. Scholars should own their learning, especially during PBL lessons and activities.

To accomplish this, teachers should know how to provide feedback, how to ask open-ended questions, and how to productively redirect scholars toward accurate learning. The Robertson Center offers materials for teachers to successfully prepare and deliver daily lessons and checks for understanding. These units offer lesson plans that promote scholar engagement and self-direction as well as tips and tricks to implement these PBL units successfully.

PBL lessons work best in longer learning blocks.

Scholars learn the thrill of becoming experts in a subject when they have extended time to immerse themselves in a fascinating topic from a
SCHEDULE & USE OF TIME

Community members are essential partners for making field studies a reality. Similarly, communicating with families about academic showcases early can ensure that scholars feel more supported.

The purpose of field studies is for scholars to engage with relevant places in their community. These experiences can support gaining social and cultural capital and offer opportunities to make unique and joyous learning experiences. Community members, local business owners, and community organizers can be incredibly supportive contributors to your scholars’ education.

Before the school year begins, schools must allocate funding for field studies and make a plan to order or acquire materials for projects.

PBL does not have to be costly, and many materials and resources can be readily available or found for free. Reach out to community partners for support; decide on cost-effective, local field studies ahead of time; and, make sure every project can be executed with available funding before planning.

Additionally, materials management requires collaboration across school operations, content leads, and teachers. It is important to be able to work closely with your leaders, grade team, and/or teaching partner to plan a routine for ordering, using, and setting up materials for each project, as well as organizing the PBL Museum and showcases.

IMPLEMENTATION

Supports Offered

The Robertson Center offers the following support to help you implement their PBL approach.

Open-Source PBL Curriculum

The Robertson Center website offers a variety of K–4 literacy-focused PBL units that are cross-disciplinary. Within these units, you’ll find:

- Unit purpose and learning outcomes
- Essential and guiding questions
- A list of engaging and challenging texts
- Day-by-day lesson sequence with suggested timing
- Exemplar projects
Virtual Community of Practice Sessions and Webinars

The Robertson Center provides opportunities for educators to come together and discuss learning. The Robertson Center shares:

- Best practices and lessons learned from educators
- Real-time feedback on lesson plans
- Helpful targeted teaching approaches
- Support around adult mindsets and scholar engagement
- Live workshops and webinars
- And more!

Sign Up

Direct Implementation & Supports

The Robertson Center partners directly with schools to share Success Academy’s best practices and learnings. This offering includes:

- Resources and implementation tools
- Professional development sessions
- Observations and feedback
- Coaching for teachers and leaders
- And more!

Reach Out

Reach

49 Schools

20,000 Scholars

100% College Matriculation Rate

Impact

Scholars become more engaged and confident learners through project-based learning at Success Academy.

- Students tend to become self-assured, confident learners and apply those skills to other subjects and areas of their lives.

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Classrooms are more engaging and exciting as PBL work continues to go up on the wall.

New ideas and topics introduced during PBL tend to serve as springboards for scholars’ future exploration and learning.

All trends are reported directly by the Robertson Center at Success Academy.

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RESOURCES

Kindergarten Unit 2: PBL From Farm to Table
Unit Purpose
This back to your most positive experience as a student—a time that was meaningful to you. Why did it have a lasting impact? How did your teacher make the experience possible?

Watch this video from Robertson: it is one project-based learning in action. The teacher is accomplished and passionate about farm to table. The students are making choices about what they will do in the project. Their learning is extending beyond the classroom and beyond their classroom walls. Their learning is extending beyond their classroom and beyond their classroom walls. The project-based learning resource is available for free through Robertson. The students are making choices about what they will do in the project. Their learning is extending beyond the classroom and beyond their classroom walls. The project-based learning resource is available for free through Robertson.

“Farm to Table” Unit
This is a kindergarten unit that focuses on projects around agricultural processes and types of produce.

Project-Based Learning: Iroquois and Lenape
Purpose: Why This Unit?
Project-based learning is a critical aspect of Robertson’s work on the development of a diverse academic curriculum. The purpose of this unit is to engage students in meaningful and authentic learning experiences that foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration.

“Birds” Unit
This is a grade 2 unit that focuses on projects and field studies around different types of birds.
"Immigration" Unit
This is a grade 3 unit that focuses on projects and activities around immigration.

Unit Purpose
This unit is one that will give students a unique opportunity to learn about immigration. It is designed to help students understand the reasons people migrate.

Unit Content
This unit includes a variety of activities, such as creating an expert book on immigration, exploring the Arctic ecosystem, and conducting experiments on hibernation.

Expert Book Assignment Overview
This is an overview of an activity from the grade 3 "Immigration" unit where scholars build an expert book on the reasons people migrate.

Building an Inuit Igloo Overview
This is an overview of an activity from the grade 1 "Arctic" unit where scholars build an Inuit igloo.

ABC Arctic Book Overview
This is an overview of an activity where scholars create a glossary of related terms across the entire grade 1 "Arctic" unit.

Hibernation Experiment Overview
This is an overview of an activity from the grade 1 "Arctic" unit where scholars conduct experiments to learn about hibernation.
Kindergarten, Unit 7: Beyond the Baking

This is a kindergarten unit that includes field studies at bakeries and supermarkets to learn about the process of baking bread.

Grade 2, Unit 3 Field Studies: Brooklyn Bridge

This is a grade 2 unit that includes field studies at nearby bridges to learn about the modern use of these structures.

Grade 4, Unit 3 Field Studies: The American Revolution

This is a grade 4 unit that includes field studies at local historical sites and locations to learn about the birth of the nation.

Study Journals/Writing Suggestions

This is an assignment overview with suggestions on how to organize scholars' writing journals.

Thinking Chart Template

This is a template for the grade 3 “Immigration” unit that asks scholars to reflect on what they know and what they want to know.

Sample Vocabulary List

This is a possible vocabulary list for the grade 3 “Immigration” unit.