

# Office of Instruction Newsletter

December 2022

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## Important Dates

December 10	Human Rights Day
December 18	Hanukkah (begins at sundown)
December 21	Winter Solstice begins at 4:47pm
December 24	Christmas Eve
December 25	Christmas Day
December 26	Kwanzaa begins
December 31	New Year's Eve

### December (17 days)

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

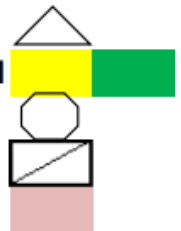
First and last days of school

Holiday/Vacation - no school

Tea. Prof. Day - no school

1/2 day of sch. - students

1.5 hr. early rel. students



# Key Factors in Successful Project-Based Learning

In this article in *Kappan*, Steven Wolk (Northeastern Illinois University) says that as a new teacher, he was inspired by the seminal authors on project-based learning: William Heard Kilpatrick, John Dewey, Carl Rogers, John Holt, Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Nancie Atwell, and Frank Smith. “From my first day,” says Wolk, “I had a project-based classroom.”

There’s a great deal of online material on high-involvement teaching available to today’s educators, he says, but he’s noticed that project-based learning is often misunderstood. He sets out to clarify what it is – and isn’t.

- *Central characteristics* – Wolk starts with a one-sentence definition: *Project-based learning is long-term investigations driven by real questions connected to the real world that result in authentic projects that show student learning.* Groups of students working in the classroom (versus at home) is an important part of the dynamic, says Wolk: “The PBL classroom is a collaborative workshop, thrumming with important work, productive talk, visible thinking, and exciting creativity. There is a degree of ‘messiness’ in these classrooms; a visitor may say it looks chaotic, but it is structured and purposeful chaos – sometimes even joyful chaos.”

- *Duration and content* – Shorter projects run 2-3 weeks, says Wolk, longer ones 4-10 weeks. He believes half the time should be spent on research, the other half on product design and creation, culminating in podcasts, surveys, interviews, oral histories, picture books, newspapers, magazines, websites, infographics, iMovies, artwork, brochures, comic books, graphs, interactive museum exhibits, games, plays, models, blueprints, gardens, murals.

- *How classroom time is used* – In traditional teaching with projects, a fifth-grade teacher might teach five weeks of lessons on the Civil War and then give students three days to do their culminating project, perhaps a poster of a significant battle. Here’s a graphic of what that looks like, with each dash (-) a lesson and the underlining (\_\_\_\_) representing students working on their project:

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In a project-based learning unit, the teacher might teach 3-4 lessons up front to build background knowledge and vocabulary, make connections to the real world, and help students care about the topic. The rest of the time students are working on researching, creating, and presenting their project, which looks like this:

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Upon completion, students present their product (perhaps an informational picture book or 15-minute podcast about the Civil War) to an outside audience.

- *Grade span and demographics* – Wolk believes project-based learning is not just for middle and high schools, and certainly not only for well-resourced schools (a phenomenon he’s noticed). Well-designed projects are just as effective in the elementary grades and schools in less-advantaged communities. “If we want students to be self-directed learners in the upper grades,” he says, “we need to show them how to be self-directed learners in the primary grades.” And he cites Martin Haberman’s advocacy in the early 1990s to move past the “pedagogy of poverty” characterized by rote instruction, teacher lectures, seatwork, and constant testing.

- *A culture of inquiry* – Project-based curriculum units should be framed around “authentic essential questions that students and teachers create together, and then students investigate,” says Wolk. “Some of these questions won’t have single correct answers

and will require investigating different perspectives and taking ethical stances.” The teacher models curiosity and openness to new ideas, making the classroom “a think tank and a public square.”

- *The role of whole-class instruction* – “Project-based learning teachers teach lessons,” says Wolk; “they just teach far fewer of them to make time for project work.” Whole-class instruction might involve mini-lessons, analysis of documents, films, visiting speakers, and discussion.
- *Learning outcomes* – When Wolk’s university students design project-based curriculum units, they tend to focus on activities – what students will do – rather than the knowledge and skills that will result. It’s important to work with the end in mind, he says, building in deeper learning that links knowledge, skills, and understandings; makes connections across disciplines and to students’ lives; and applies what’s learned in authentic situations.
- *Lesson planning* – “A different paradigm of teaching requires a different paradigm of planning,” says Wolk. Plans for mini-lessons and whole-class discussions will be conventional, he says, but for project time, when groups of students are working on their products, there’s a different kind of plan: notes on students to check in with; a mini-lesson that might be needed for some students; feedback on student work; a reminder for a student to use a particular resource; a brief class meeting about the project.
- *Standards – necessary but not sufficient* – Of course projects should help students master relevant standards, says Wolk, but he believes doing just that “would be setting the bar far too low.” Standards are the floor, he says, and a project-based learning unit should aim higher, including collaboration, complex thinking skills, and habits of mind.
- *Managing* – Teaching a good PBL unit is like juggling 17 balls in the air, says Wolk. He has these suggestions for teachers:
  - Give students a project sheet at the beginning of the unit that explains the project and lists specific requirements and due dates.
  - Post a large project map on the wall that explains each step week by week and lists any items that are due.
  - Use a clipboard or tablet during project time to take brief notes on students’ progress and reminders for the following day.
  - Explicitly teach time management and organizational skills to students, perhaps in mini-lessons spread through the unit.

The result of all this should be that students are working harder than the teacher.

- *Feedback* – A summative assessment is only one part of the process, says Wolk: “When PBL teachers are zipping around the classroom helping students with their projects, they are assessing as they teach.” To get the best projects, three elements need to be in place:
  - The work is done in the classroom where it can be observed and tweaked.
  - Students get teacher feedback throughout the project.
  - The teacher shares examples of excellent work so students know what quality looks like.

At the end of a project, students’ self-assessment and the comments of an outside audience are more important than the teacher’s assessment.

Wolk concludes with five opportunities offered by well-orchestrated project-based curriculum units:

- Students develop vital 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, media literacy, and empathy.
- Students have agency as they choose and create their own projects.
- Students engage in close reading of books, texts, and online source material.
- Students work on real-world problems – for example, homelessness, access to fresh water around the world, the refugee crisis, and voter turnout.

- When a whole school is involved in project-based learning, students, educators, parents, and visitors are “surrounded by authentic, creative, beautiful, joyful, and world-changing student creations,” says Wolk. “You would see and feel this force all around you. The power and potential are limitless. It would be thrilling.”

[“Clearing Up Misconceptions About Project-Based Learning”](#) by Steven Wolk in *Kappan*, October 2022 (Vol. 104, #2, pp. 26-31); Wolk can be reached at [s-wolk@neu.edu](mailto:s-wolk@neu.edu).

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## Stereotypes About Middle School, and How We Can Do Better

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In this *Kappan* article, Nancy Deutsch (University of Virginia) says her third-grade daughter is already dreading middle school, based on the TV shows and books she’s been exposed to. “My heart sank,” says Deutsch, who has been deeply involved in an initiative to reshape middle schools. “Here was my own daughter parroting back all the stereotypes about the middle-school experience that we are seeking to challenge.” Among them: middle school is extremely anxiety-producing and difficult and kids have to grin and bear it, hoping that high school will be better.

Deutsch shares four stereotypes about the middle grades and shows how experts’ new understanding of the young adolescent brain can prompt changes that will increase the number of middle schools that are developmentally appropriate and give teens a positive experience:

- *Stereotype #1: Young adolescents are risk-takers, so middle school should teach students to navigate risk.* Teens are often seen as rebellious, impulsive, and prone to making bad choices. There’s some truth to this, says Deutsch; their brains have an increased appetite for novel, intense experiences. But not all risk-taking is problematic. “Rather than ignore or suppress this developmental tendency,” she says, “adults should encourage positive risk-taking in ways that nurture self-confidence, encourage intellectual curiosity, and inform young people’s independence.” In fact, teens are getting ready for a major leap into the unknown: leaving their family and developing their own independent lives.

- *Stereotype #2: Middle schoolers’ brains are fully developed and won’t change; no, they’re immature and can’t engage in complex thinking.* Recent insights from neuroscience help us unpack these contradictory beliefs. A lot is still changing in young adolescents’ brains, but some areas are fully formed and capable of complex thinking. “The ability of the adolescent brain to realize its dynamic potential,” says Deutsch, “hinges on opportunities to experience ongoing enrichment; explore new pursuits; and engage in deeper, project-based learning. A middle-school experience defined by regurgitation of basic facts, passive learning, and disengagement is exactly the opposite of what students need at this stage.” It’s especially important that students don’t feel they’re locked into a low academic track at this stage.

- *Stereotype #3: Middle school students don’t care about adults.* It’s certainly true that approval from peers and group status are increasingly important for young teens. But kids also value strong connections with teachers, mentors, community activists, and other adults in their lives, says Deutsch, “to guide them as they navigate new relationships, shape their identities, and tackle new challenges.” Switching classes every 45 minutes and being asked to focus on academic content can work against student-adult connections. Advisory groups and teacher teams are ways that middle schools can support closer relationships. So is the simple act of educators regularly asking students small questions about their interests and life outside school.

• *Stereotype #4: Middle schoolers are self-focused and not ready to be a force for positive change.* Yes, young teens are absorbed with figuring out who they are and where they fit in the world, caught up with social-identity questions about race, gender, and sexuality, says Deutsch – and “this does lead to some navel-gazing.” But adolescence is also an age of “heightened social awareness and critical thinking, which leads young adolescents to explore how they fit into our social systems, to identify injustices in those systems, and to imagine possible places for themselves in society” – including as change-makers. For example, Marley Dias created #1000BlackGirlBooks at age 10 in response to the ELA curriculum in her school.

Deutsch concludes by describing the features of middle schools that successfully work for young adolescents:

- Engaging students in project-based, student-centered learning experiences that fuel their sense of autonomy and help shape their identities;
- Orchestrating learning experiences that allow students to take risks and learn from their mistakes;
- Promoting a growth mindset by using a mastery approach to grading and having students continuously think about their own learning (versus comparing themselves to others);
- Using advisories or morning meetings to foster teacher-student and peer relationships;
- Giving students opportunities to research and engage in public discourse about topics that are important to them.

[“‘You Just Have to Get Through It’: Letting Go of Enduring Stereotypes About Middle School”](#) by Nancy Deutsch in *Kappan*, October 2022 (Vol. 104, #2, pp. 6-10); Deutsch can be reached at [nancyd@virginia.edu](mailto:nancyd@virginia.edu).

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## Jennifer Gonzalez on Differentiating with “Seminars”

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In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez joins with Connecticut elementary-school coordinator Melanie Meehan to describe “seminars” – short (7-10-minute), small-group (4-5 students) mini-lessons that students sign up for to discuss a specific topic while the rest of the class is doing independent or group work. The teacher decides on one or two seminars to offer based on observing students as they work or a poll to see which areas they’re struggling with.

Meehan says seminars are very helpful in 50-minute writing workshop classes (she says the word seminar is “admittedly fancy” but her kids love it). Here’s the sequence:

- A 7-10-minute full-class explanation;
- 20 minutes of independent writing during which she convenes a seminar;
- A 2-3-minute interruption when she shares an observation or teaching point with the whole class;
- Another 20 minutes of independent writing with another pullout seminar.

Having students sign up is important, says Meehan: “Ultimately the goal of learning is transfer. It’s owning your learning and being a learner out in the world without a teacher at your side. So I love having kids sign up for their own seminars.” But there are times when certain students need to work on a skill or habit and she calls them over.

Once this routine was established in Meehan’s classroom, students who had mastered a skill could start conducting seminars themselves. At this point, Meehan became more efficient at managing demands on her time and built more confidence and agency in her students. Gonzalez believes seminars can be used in any subject area and grade; the only prerequisite is at least one independent work period during which students can be convened for a seminar.

# Teaching the Holidays: The December Dilemma

By Kimberly Keiserman

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*It's December, which means the holidays are upon us—but how do educators best address them in the classroom? Kimberly Keiserman, Education Program Associate, Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, has six strategies.*

December is a joyful time for many Americans—and not just those who celebrate [Christmas](#) as a sacred holiday or cultural event. Jews celebrate [Hanukkah](#), Buddhists celebrate [Bodhi Day](#), many African Americans celebrate [Kwanzaa](#), and cultures across the world celebrate the [Winter Solstice](#).

For educators, however, the convergence of so many holidays can create the December dilemma: how to acknowledge and respect the wide variety of holidays and traditions their students hold dear without implying that some are more important than others.

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was no recognition of a December dilemma. Schools routinely marked the coming of Christmas with religious pageants, nativity scenes, and organized prayer. Students of different faiths or no faith were marginalized and excluded. Since the U.S. Supreme Court struck down school prayer in the 1960s, schools have abandoned such religious rituals, and many have struggled to develop more inclusive holiday programs.

Most teachers are well aware of the history surrounding holiday celebrations, including recent charges by some commentators that Christmas has been secularized and marginalized in pursuit of multiculturalism. During Tanenbaum's webinar, [Addressing the December Dilemma in Schools](#), participants were asked what words and phrases came to mind when they heard “December dilemma.” Responses included “crazy,” “stress,” “offend,” “only acknowledging Christmas,” and “children feeling left out”—conveying the apprehension teachers feel about celebrating the season without excluding any students or favoring any traditions.

Not all participant responses were negative, however. One said, “How to honor and recognize people's cultures and values without excluding anyone,” and another said, “Uncomfortable, but an opportunity.” These responses get to the heart of the matter. While the December dilemma presents real challenges for educators, it also offers tremendous opportunities: to include a wider range of religious and cultural traditions in their teaching; to promote religious literacy and respect for differences; and to foster a culture of inclusion.

**Here are six ways educators can embrace these opportunities:**

1. **Move beyond Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa.** One way to solve the December dilemma is to focus less on December and more on the many holidays that take place throughout the year. For instance, Rosh Hashanah and Passover—two of the highest holidays in Judaism—are seldom discussed while greater attention is given to Hanukkah because it usually falls in December. The Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which occurs at varying times of the year, also tends to be overlooked when it doesn't fall in December. Learning more about these and other holidays deepens students' understanding of their classmates, their community, and the world.

[Harvard's Pluralism Project](#) offers a comprehensive multi-faith calendar, which can be used with Tanenbaum's [holiday planning template](#), to create a yearlong schedule of holidays to explore in the classroom. Teachers can connect these diverse celebrations through a thematic framework of values common to different religious and secular traditions—such as peace, caring, thankfulness, forgiveness, and renewal. For more ideas, see Tanenbaum's [Shared Visions](#).

For an elementary lesson that introduces a variety of winter holidays related to light, download Tanenbaum's

[Rituals and Traditions about Light: Hopefulness and Waiting](#).

2. **Use holidays as an opportunity to dig deeper.** Go beyond *how*, *when*, and *where* people celebrate to *why* they celebrate and the *many different ways* they celebrate, even within the same tradition. Avoid monolithic representations of groups by exposing students to the lived experiences of real people, allowing them to read personal narratives, interact with guest speakers, and interview community members. By exploring the diversity within diversity, students gain a deeper



knowledge of culture, history, geography, literature, art, music, and more. Just as important, they begin to see religious and cultural differences as normal and interesting.

For information about a variety of holidays, go to the BBC's [Directory of Religions](#). To learn more about the major world religions, read the [World Religions Fact Sheet](#).

3. **Encourage students to explore their own identities and traditions.** Lessons that allow students to explore and share aspects of their identities—including their religious and cultural traditions—help them become cognizant of, and interested in, the similarities and differences that exist all around them. As they learn more about themselves, they become better prepared to learn about others.

For an elementary lesson that encourages students to explore their family traditions, download [My Traditions](#).

4. **Ensure a safe, respectful classroom environment.** When discussing religious and cultural traditions in the classroom, it's crucial to establish and reinforce ground rules for respectful communication so that all students feel comfortable participating. Part of this is teaching students how to ask questions respectfully—for instance, “What holidays are important to you?” instead of, “Why don't you celebrate Christmas?”

Go to [Respecting Each Other](#) for a K-12 lesson in which students reflect on the meaning of respect and create a set of ground rules for how to treat one another.

5. **Understand your responsibilities under the First Amendment.** The Supreme Court has made it clear that educators can teach *about* religious holidays, practices, and beliefs, but they may not celebrate, endorse, or denigrate any religious holidays, practices, or beliefs. All lessons about religion must be neutral, objective, and non-devotional.

The First Amendment Center's [Finding Common Ground](#) provides legal guidelines for addressing religious holidays in public school, including guidelines for holiday decorating, assemblies, and musical performances.

6. **Communicate with parents about any plans to teach about religious holidays, practices, and beliefs.** Explain the academic goals of these lessons, emphasizing that students will be learning about religious differences, not being indoctrinated in a different religion. Be prepared to answer questions and allay concerns. Some family members may be willing to speak to the class about their traditions and share primary sources such as photos or videos. Such presentations can bring the lesson to life and are entirely appropriate as long as they are non-devotional and family members are asked to speak from their own experiences, not as spokespersons for a religious or cultural group.

With these strategies, educators can turn the December dilemma into an opportunity to promote religious literacy and respectful curiosity—important global competencies for the 21st century.