



# The Foundations of Place-based Learning

*“If you don’t know where you are, you don’t know who you are.”*

– Wallace Stegner

- ✿ **Seventh-grade students** use approved scientific protocols to monitor salamander population trends in a National Park, submitting the data to a permanent regional database.
- ✿ **Fifth-grade students** develop and publish an illustrated walking tour booklet of a historic neighborhood, including a map, commentary, and photographs of each building.
- ✿ **Kindergarteners** work with a local artist to develop an ABC coloring book about the creatures found at a local nature center and the book is sold to raise funds for nature education.
- ✿ **Sixth-grade students** develop text and photographs used in official National Park interpretive signs about the history and recreational opportunities of their home landscape.
- ✿ **Fourth-grade students** work with staff at a local zoo to develop, publish and distribute a “Quest” treasure hunt that leads visitors on a guided tour of the history of a city park.
- ✿ **Eighth-grade students** collect data on ground-level ozone damage to plants growing in their schoolyard, as part of a national study.
- ✿ **Eleventh-grade students** collaborate to write a weekly newspaper column about the special cultural and natural places of their community, including interviews, photo-documentation, and other primary research.

Welcome to the world of place-based learning!

## The Roots

Place-based learning and civic engagement have emerged over the past decade at the rich ecotone of environmental education, conservation, and community development. They are fed by the strong roots grown by forty years of environmental education in the United States. In some ways, in fact, PBL can be understood as environmental education gone completely local, wholly integrated with the learning standards and expanded beyond the natural environment to include the cultural, social, and economic conditions of place. Place-based learning approaches seek to capitalize on the strong affinity people have for their communities to accomplish ecological and cultural literacy as well as a range of conservation and community stewardship objectives.

Through the integration of civic engagement opportunities in place-based curricula, learning is connected to action: students and citizens engage together in the civic life of their communities. This is a values-driven approach, designed to advance educational goals together with locally identified social, economic and environmental objectives. It contributes to the broad adoption of stewardship perspectives, skills and action and the restoration, rebuilding, and reconnecting of human communities and natural systems.



*As participants in place-based learning become actively engaged in studying and responsibly addressing relevant local issues, the results have included stronger community support for conservation and education, higher levels of learner engagement, and a renewed sense of value for the spirit of place.*

## Reconnecting Youth to Local Nature and Culture

One of the trends most alarming to future conservation and stewardship efforts is the growth of a youth culture that has turned away dramatically from nature and the outdoors. Numerous studies show a drastic decrease in the amount of time young people spend in the world outdoors, whether in recreational pursuits, work, or just hanging out in the neighborhood.

Similarly, in our mobile and ever more global society, with access to mass culture a click away,

children are increasingly disconnected from local history and cultural traditions. With visits to local historical sites on the decline, a growing loss of regional identity, and traditional crafts, arts and skills often seen more as charming than practical, there is a great need for a revival in connection to our heritage. These are the things that define us, give meaning to our lives and our communities and are worth fighting for.

PBL works to counter the negative trends of social fragmentation and disconnection from nature, culture and community by reconnecting people to the natural and cultural world of which they are a part. PBL works to reconnect kids to the magical and practical mysteries and truths of their native surroundings; and connects ordinary citizens to the responsibilities of community stewardship and civic life. By encouraging personal growth and change, PBL contributes to the work of envisioning sustainable community and bringing those visions to reality.

While it has been a long-standing goal of environmental education to connect children to nature, PBL extends this connection to specific places, people and community concerns. A strong bond with and affection for home places has been demonstrated to be an important prerequisite to taking an active role in the stewardship of one's community.



*Place-based engagement opportunities abound on public lands of all sizes and shapes, including small urban pocket parks.*

*“Part of our task, as a society, is to begin to think in terms of comparative risks, and the great benefits of a national nature-child reunion. Yes, there are risks outside our homes. But there are also risks in raising children under virtual house arrest: threats to their independent judgment and value of place, to their ability to feel awe and wonder, to their sense of stewardship for the Earth—and, most immediately, threats to their psychological and physical health.”*

*– Richard Louv (2005)*



## *Place-based Learning and Civic Engagement: Working Definitions*

What do you say when someone asks you what PBL or CE are and why you have chosen this combined approach? The simple working definitions below should be helpful.

### **Place-based Learning**

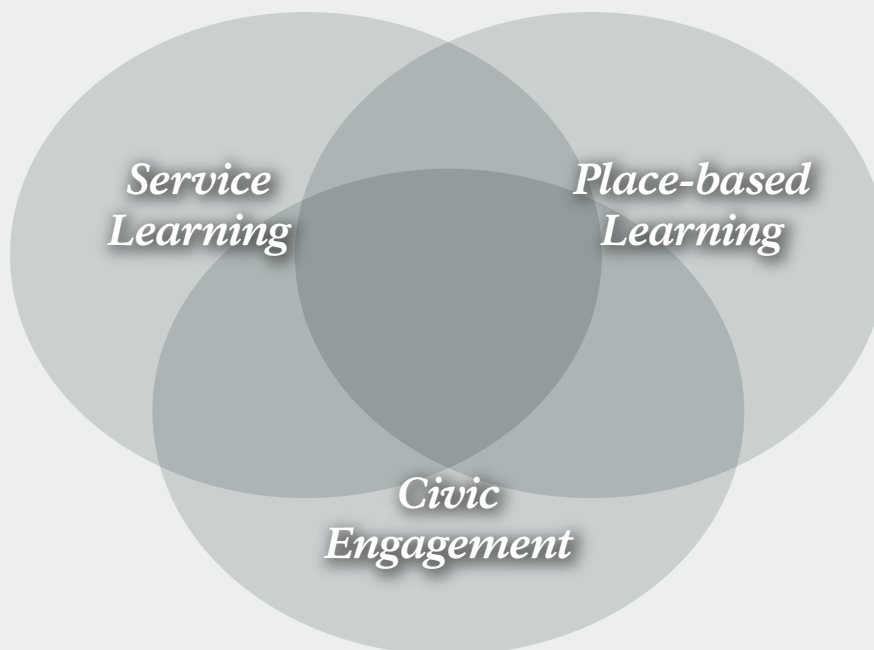
Place-based learning is an educational approach that uses all aspects of the local environment, including local cultural, historical, and socio-political situations and the natural and built environment, as the integrating context for learning. In its most developed forms, it includes a clear focus on learning through civic engagement and participation in service projects of obvious relevance to the local school and community.

### **Civic Engagement**

Civic engagement promotes civic knowledge, responsibility, and participation in individual and collective actions in support of the stewardship of community natural and cultural resources, and the resolution of issues of public concern. Youth civic engagement generally involves youth in identifying appropriate projects. Civic engagement is most effective when it builds on the foundation developed through place-based learning.

### **Service Learning**

Service learning is a method whereby students learn and develop through active participation in a thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of a community while also meeting the students' educational objectives. While service learning is an important component of PBL, not all service-learning projects are grounded in local PBL experiences.



*Place-based learning, civic engagement, and service learning are very complimentary approaches and can be combined successfully to accomplish critical school and community goals.*



## Related Approaches Defined

Public lands educators and schools have been using similar approaches or strategies in their work with students, teachers of all stripes and the general public for decades. In fact, PBL integrates a number of related teaching methodologies, including environmental education, education for sustainable development, project-based learning, community-based learning, experiential education, environmental literacy, and youth voice.

### Environmental Education

Beginning in the early 1970s, educators have been developing curricula to build awareness and understanding about how natural and built environments function and how human beings can live in responsible relationship to the environment. The term “environmental education” is often used to imply education within the school system, from primary to post-secondary. However, it is sometimes used more broadly to include all efforts to educate the public and other audiences through print materials, websites, media campaigns, etc. PBL has emerged from the best of environmental education, interpreting environment broadly to include the cultural, social and economic aspects of a place and contending that the learner’s own environment—their place—is the most effective context for learning stewardship.

### Education for Sustainability / Education for Sustainable Development

Education for Sustainability (EFS), also known as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is an educational approach emerging strongly around the globe that seeks to empower people to assume responsibility for creating a sustainable future. PBL is often seen as the United States version of EFS.

### Project-based Learning/ Problem-based Learning

In project-based learning, students work in teams to explore topics in authentic ways and create presentations to share and apply what they have learned, resulting in deeper knowledge of subject matter, increased self-direction and motivation

and improved research and problem-solving skills. Often students will explore problems in depth in a variant known as problem-based learning. PBL takes it a step further, by involving students in projects directly related to their communities. Both project-based and problem based methods are frequently employed in place-based learning.

### Community-based Learning

Community-based learning is a set of teaching and learning strategies that enable youth and adults to pursue learning within the unique context of their community. It is a broad framework that includes service-learning, experiential learning, school-to-work, youth apprenticeship, lifelong learning and other methods. In this context, *community* includes the schools, formal and informal institutions in one’s neighborhood, and the entire world through such resources as the Internet. In PBL, this setting is used explicitly to develop connectedness to one’s place that leads to civic responsibility and stewardship.

### Experiential Education

Experiential education is an approach in which educators purposefully engage learners in direct experiences and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills and clarify values. Students make discoveries and experiment with knowledge themselves instead of hearing or reading about the experiences of others. Students also reflect on their experiences, thus developing new skills, attitudes, and theories or ways of thinking. PBL is a type of experiential learning with an emphasis on using the community as the basis for creating experiential opportunities.

### Environmental Literacy

Environmental literacy is the goal of environmental education. A person is environmentally literate when they have the knowledge of environmental processes and issues needed to make informed decisions and participate in civic affairs. PBL seeks to develop environmental literacy that is grounded in a broad understanding of the interrelationship of natural and cultural systems.



## Youth Voice

Many approaches to educational and youth development, including service learning, consider the systemic engagement of youth in the identification, selection, implementation and systematic evaluation of community projects to be an essential element of a successful program. By engaging youth, projects are more likely to be appropriate to youth interest and skills and less likely to use youth inappropriately to solve adult problems. PBL seeks to cultivate youth voice as an indispensable component of local civic health.

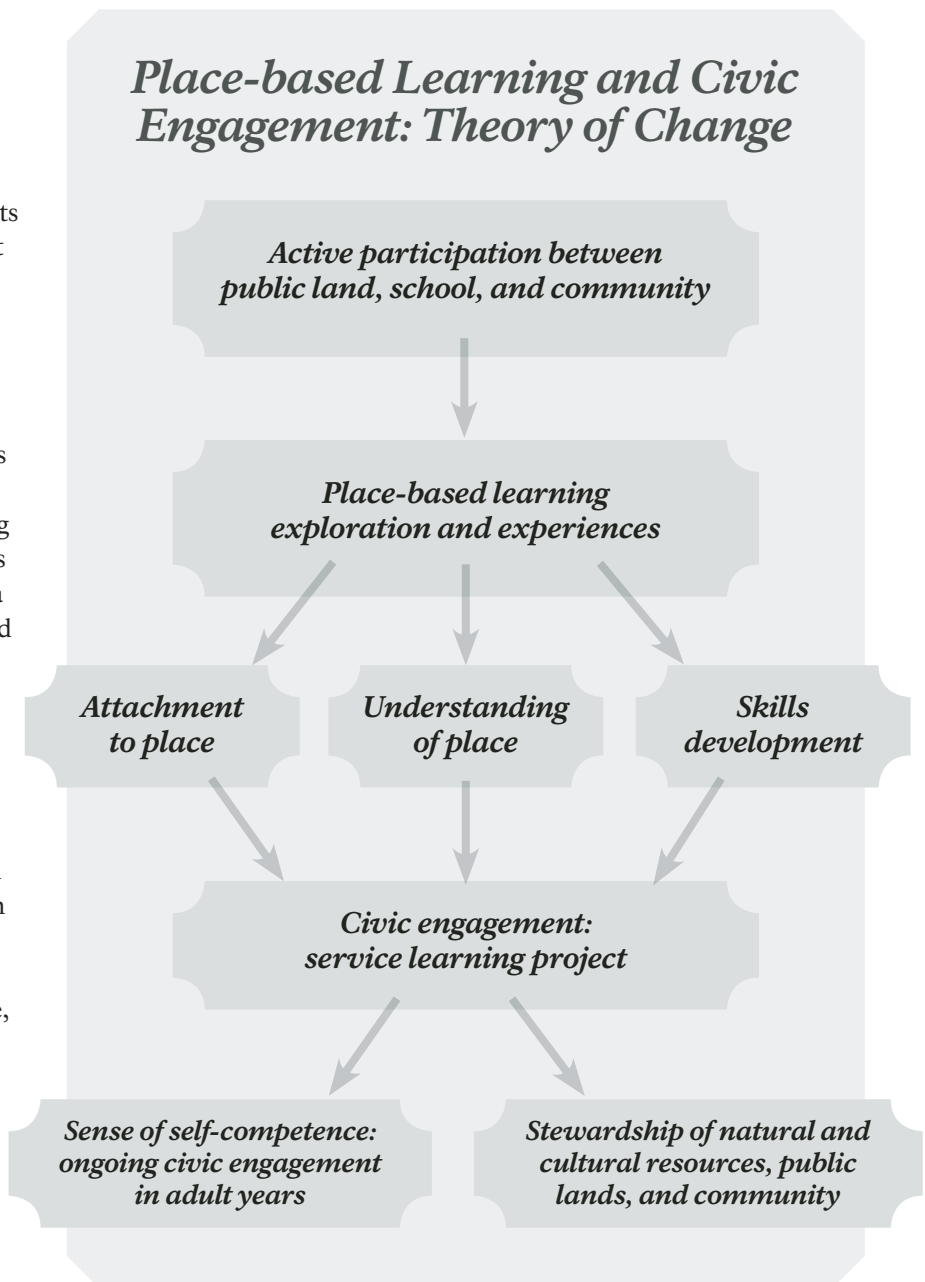
*“Authentic environmental commitment emerges out of firsthand experiences with real places on a small, manageable scale over time.”*

– David Sobel (2004)

## PBL and CE Theory of Change

In a place-based learning approach, land managers, civic leaders, teachers and students enter into long-term partnerships that direct learning activity to local places, resources and circumstances, enhancing student understanding of and attachment to local natural and cultural resources and public lands. As students develop understanding and skills, they bring their energy and talents to bear on critical environmental and social issues, through relevant and real-life learning opportunities. Participation in these projects has a lasting impact on students, leading to a culture of volunteerism and stewardship, and building real solutions to local problems.

PBL is relevant anywhere because it links learning to the particular characteristics of people and places and to the opportunities and challenges there. It initiates a process of social change by immersing students in local heritage, culture and landscapes and the rich diversity of community-based opportunities and experiences where their actions can have the greatest impact. As students mature, their understanding and involvement at the local level serves as a springboard for study of regional, national and global issues. Grounded in the resources, issues and values of the community, place-based learning is inherently tailored to diverse populations and situations.





## Goals of PBL

*“Over the past decade, educators from New England to Alaska have been relocating the curriculum away from generic texts to the particularities of their own communities and regions. This process has been accompanied by the adoption of instructional practices that draw heavily on student initiative and responsibility as well as the talent and expertise of adults outside the school. The results have included higher levels of student engagement, more commitment to public education, energized and excited teachers and principals, and a renewed sense of what there is to value in the local.”*

– Greg Smith (2001)

### ***The Place-based Education Evaluation Collaborative (PEEC)***

is a group of programs and a foundation that work together to:

- 1) Improve their programs through individual and cross-program evaluation;
- 2) Identify, develop, and disseminate evaluation techniques, tools and approaches that can be applied to other place-based learning providers; and
- 3) Contribute to the research base underlying the field of place-based learning and school change.

For more research information and copies of evaluation reports, see [www.PEECworks.org](http://www.PEECworks.org).

School teachers and public lands educators are finding that rooting their educational programming deeply in the local community, both physically and thematically, is an effective strategy for achieving many of their highest priority goals. Place-based learning and civic engagement “feeds three birds with the same seed” as they address the integrated goals of:

- **Ecological Integrity**—Through project-based learning, students make tangible contributions to resolving local environmental issues and conserving local environmental quality.
- **Community Social and Economic Vitality**—PBL forges strong ties between local social and environmental organizations and their constituencies in the schools and community, which helps to improve quality of life and economic vitality.
- **Student Achievement**—PBL boosts students’ engagement, academic achievement, and sense of personal efficacy as stewards of their local environment and community.

## Benefits

Place-based learning seeks the home field advantage, where learning is attached to real, tangible things, places and people and is accessible to every learning style.

The idea of connecting schools, communities and community lands through place-based learning is gaining momentum around the country—and for good reasons. Independent evaluations of PBL programs have yielded impressive results. In New England, the Place-based Education Evaluation Collaborative (PEEC) has undertaken a rigorous and ongoing evaluation process to gauge the effectiveness and outcomes of the place-based learning model in a range of outcome areas including academic achievement, civic engagement, and student stewardship behavior. This comprehensive evaluation has examined nearly 100 schools (rural, suburban and urban) in five states, and involved 800 individual or focus group interviews, 200 student interviews, 750 educator surveys and 2000 student questionnaires. The findings are clear. Place-based learning:



- fosters students' connection to place
- creates vibrant partnerships between schools and communities
- boosts student achievement, and
- improves environmental, social, and economic vitality.

In short, place-based learning helps students learn to take care of the world by understanding where they live and taking action in their own backyards and communities.

### **BENEFITS FOR PUBLIC LANDS MANAGERS**

Education conducted on public lands and in partnership with local communities and schools offer excellent ways for public land managers to practice good civic engagement while advancing public land stewardship objectives. Public lands of any size—from large national forests to small urban pocket parks—increasingly are open systems connected to and dependent upon the communities around them.

Because learning and conducting service projects outside the classroom is a strong focus of PBL and CE, the potential benefit for public resource managers is great. The number of physical engagements with places through PBL is limited only by the creativity and imagination of students, teachers, and managers. Ecological monitoring projects, citizen science engagements, physical enhancements, the removal of exotic non-native species, exhibits, demonstrations, brochures, the construction of new trails, and the maintenance of old ones—almost all can be accomplished over time through service learning opportunities and school-community-public lands partnerships. Place-based approaches are about doing things that need to be done and learning and connecting people to place in the process.

Place-based learning projects help to break down the boundaries between parks and people. Initiatives that begin in the school reach into the community and generate enthusiasm for conservation and stewardship, and greater support for public lands. While PBL and CE accomplish

tangible projects on and for public lands, in the long term the most important result is the impact on students' lifelong ecological literacy and commitment to the public places in their community.

*“For the public land manager, the value of place-based learning is to craft cooperative strategies for the long-term protection of the land and resources. Without schools, we are operating without all the tools in our tool box.”*

– Rolf Diamant,  
Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller  
National Historical Park

### **BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS**

It is well documented that when schools meaningfully connect learning to the local context through partnerships with local public lands, there is an increase in student engagement and enthusiasm. Likewise, it is accepted among educational professionals that when students are engaged and enthusiastic, their academic achievement improves. PBL and CE have the potential to help students to learn better.

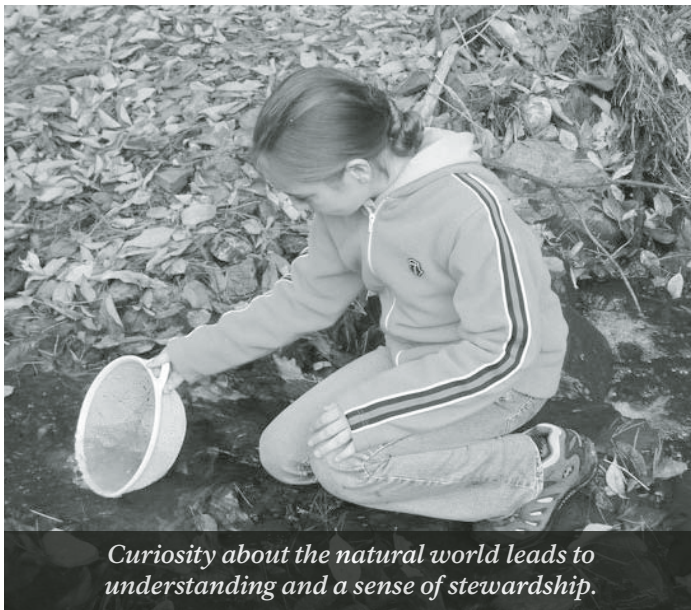
*Student engagement increases when the project has authentic value to the school or community.*





But in today's complex educational settings, academic achievement alone is not enough to warrant the long-term investment PBL requires. Academic achievement as measured by standardized tests is only one of several key educational metrics needed to understand the outcomes, impacts and importance of PBL to students. PBL makes available the full suite of learning opportunities that land and community have to offer. PBL tends to incorporate many "best practices" in education today such as teaching to multiple intelligences, brain-based learning, collaborative learning, differentiated instruction, etc.

Other documented benefits of value to schools include re-invigoration of teachers, strengthened community connections and transformation of school culture. Teachers involved in PBL report higher levels of satisfaction on the job and much-expanded peer and community networks, contributing a solution to the difficult national problem of qualified teacher retention. And, because students are involved in real community work, schools take on a new level of relevancy. This helps build community support for schools, including public school budgets, and attracts community resources such as public lands staff to local schools. Over time, PBL and CE have been shown to have the potential to shape and become embedded in a school's culture and identity.



*Curiosity about the natural world leads to understanding and a sense of stewardship.*

## BENEFITS FOR COMMUNITIES

*"There is a potential to involve the whole community in the education of children. This is a unique thing. It is a departure from most people sending kids off to the school and trusting local educators. If everyone feels they have a hand in education, it will lead to a lot stronger support for education in the local schools—IF everyone has some degree of ownership."*

– Forester Haven Neal, Gorham, NH

The development of deep and multifaceted educational partnerships also results in the growth of social capital, that invisible web of trust and reciprocity that supports community vitality. As partnerships develop, different constituencies come to understand the value of each other's perspectives, and enjoy the benefits of each other's skills and experiences as they tackle mutually identified projects. In this collaborative environment, students are seen as a community asset, and their energy, enthusiasm and fresh outlook are welcomed. Local environmental quality benefits from the conservation projects that often serve as the context for place-based learning practice, as do social and cultural resources. In fact, a recent EPA-funded study investigating the relationship between PBL and environmental quality found that education programs *can* achieve measurable improvements in air quality and that the single strongest predictor of air quality was the degree to which the program incorporated the principles of place-based learning. Duffin (2008).

Noted educator Jack Chin writes (2001), "Place-based education ... enables students to see that learning is relevant to their world, to take pride in where they live, to connect with the rest of the world, and to develop into concerned and contributing citizens." Successful PBL practitioners develop the skills of a facilitator, team builder, communicator, and partnership developer, to build the necessary social capital around students, schools and the ongoing real work of building healthy, sustainable communities. They help their





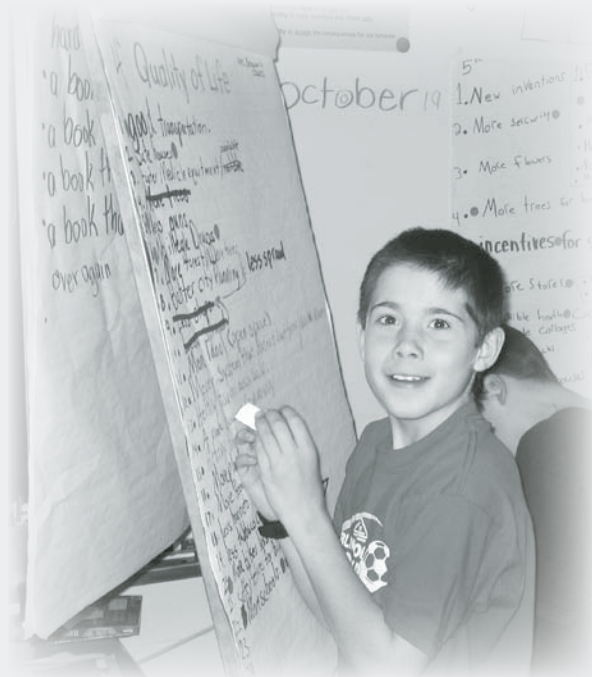
## Promising Practices

The following educational practices can contribute to the success of place-based learning and civic engagement programs:

- **Grounded in the particular attributes of a place**—Local natural and cultural systems and themes serve as the context for learning across disciplines, with a meaningful portion of the learning taking place out of the classroom, on-site in the schoolyard and in the local community and environment.
- **Multigenerational and multicultural**—Programs connect students with their community and support the development of appreciation for the diverse talents and perspectives of others.
- **Supported by partnerships**—A diversity of local public and private organizations form long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships in support of the PBL and CE programs.
- **Project-based and investigation-focused**—Students are provided with opportunities to apply critical-thinking skills as they conduct comprehensive, experiential investigations into natural and cultural systems and work toward resolution of real community issues.
- **Relevant**—Programs contribute to the community's vitality and environmental quality by addressing specific community-identified priorities and supporting the community's role in fostering global environmental quality and social equity.
- **Valued by program leaders**—Leadership of schools and community partner organizations recognize the program as being integral to achieving other institutional goals, including addressing educational standards.
- **Student focused**—Learning experiences are custom tailored for the local audience and to students' individual learning styles and are designed with student input including a focus

on issues that are personally relevant to the learners.

- **Interdisciplinary**—Learning integrates content and skills from multiple subject areas.
- **Collaborative**—Teachers share the workload among their colleagues, administrators, students and community members, all of whom have active roles and responsibilities.
- **Reflective**—Students and the educational team (teachers, administrators, community partners) use multiple reflection and evaluation techniques before, during and after the learning experiences to assimilate their learning and examine the extent to which the learning experience has met school and community goals.
- **Expanding in scope**—The development of sense of place and local knowledge serves as the foundation for understanding and participating appropriately in regional and global issues as children mature.





students to develop the attitudes, understandings and skills they need to sustain the natural and cultural integrity of the places they live. Place-based learning programs prepare students to participate actively in our democratic society.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**Q** *How can I convince the local principal that place-based learning and civic engagement are worth trying?*

**A** Show them the evaluation results documented in “Why PBL Matters” ([www.peecworks.org/PEEC/PEEC\\_Reports/S01248363-01267A71](http://www.peecworks.org/PEEC/PEEC_Reports/S01248363-01267A71)). Across the country, unbiased evaluators are confirming that PBL programs produce higher student engagement, higher teacher retention, strong academic achievement especially in the area of writing, and strong community support for education. Dig in deeper with skeptics to find out their exact concerns and try to address them.

**Q** *How can I convince the manager of my local public land area that PBL and CE support our mission?*

**A** Analyze your organization’s mission and annual objectives in terms of community outreach, public relations, public participation, cultural or natural resource inventory and monitoring, research such as citizen science and oral histories, resource management practices, and related areas. Creatively consider ways that student involvement could help you to meet these objectives while providing the students with relevant educational opportunities. Present the ideas to your manager from the starting point of his or her highest objectives. Back up your proposal with success stories from this manual or [www.promiseofplace.org](http://www.promiseofplace.org).

**Q** *How can I address teachers’ concerns about fitting place-based learning into their class schedule, with so much to do to prepare students for the standardized tests?*



*The academic scope of place-based learning and civic engagement*

Drawn from the work of Roger Hart



**A** Studies have shown that PBL certainly doesn't hurt and has the strong potential to improve academic achievement (see [www.pecworks.org](http://www.pecworks.org)). Place-based learning will not be successful if it is an "add-on" to an already full schedule. Rather, it works best when it is recognized as a more effective strategy for accomplishing existing educational objectives. There is no question that student academic achievement is important, and schools are held accountable for students' performance on state and national tests. A PBL and CE approach can contribute to strong academic preparation in addition to instilling a sense of stewardship and other community benefits. By looking at each educational objective through the lens of place-based learning, you will find multiple local project opportunities that are highly motivational for students.

**Q** *How much does place-based learning cost, and where do I get the money?*

**A** Place-based learning does not need to cost more than traditional learning. School administrators have reported that the cost of copies and transporting students can be made up through lower textbook purchases. The additional adults required for field studies can be found through mutually beneficial community partnerships. Funds for special supplies or travel can often be obtained through grants from private foundations or agencies, or donations from local businesses. Funders are often attracted to the range of goals addressed by PBL, from building skills for democratic society to conserving publicly accessible open space.

**Q** *How do teachers handle discipline when they take students outside the classroom?*

**A** Teachers who frequently use the community as a classroom have found that it works best to establish clear rules and boundaries, the same way they do in their classroom. As students grow accustomed to field studies, they understand that these experiences outside of the classroom are an integral part of their learning rather than a break from it, and they behave accordingly. Public land managers should ask teachers if there are any rules they need to be aware of and support.

**Q** *How should I approach schools/community organizations to ask them to be partners?*

**A** We have found that the best way to start a partnership is by careful study of your potential partners' missions, goals and culture. This will help you to propose a project that will be as beneficial to them as it is to you. Ask to meet with them personally to explore the idea of partnering. Point out the ways in which the project is in line with their organizational objectives and listen carefully to their questions and concerns. Once you have broached the idea with them, the key to success will be continual, on-going, open communication.

**Q** *How is place-based learning different from environmental education and service learning?*

**A** At their best, they merge strongly. Place-based learning has its roots in environmental education and, similar to the best of environmental education, it uses the full range of local environments—natural, economic, social, political and cultural—as the foundation for learning. PBL includes service learning as one of its key strategies. There are two key differences: that PBL takes an integrated and holistic look at the community and builds toward a strong civic engagement component; and that PBL resonates better in some communities than environmental education, which is sometimes perceived as having a pre-determined outside agenda.

**Q** *Who else is using a place-based learning approach?*

**A** Place-based learning is being adopted by schools and learning centers across the country. In addition to the organizational hosts of the Promise of Place website ([www.promiseofplace.org](http://www.promiseofplace.org)), other organizations that have been very involved with this approach include the Rural School and Community Trust, the Center for Ecoliteracy, the Coalition for Community Schools and other parts of the U.S. National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service. In much of the world outside of the U.S., very similar work is



being carried out under the name, Education for Sustainable Development, or ESD.

**Q** Will PBL and CE activities have a negative impact on our natural or cultural resources?

**A** Of course, increased traffic in natural and cultural areas could diminish the resource base in the absence of thoughtful monitoring. It is important that resource managers participate actively with education staff to select and develop implementation strategies for PBL and CE projects to ensure resource protection and enhancement, rather than any potential degradation.

**Q** Does place-based learning mean that local students will only learn about this small town? We live in a global society!

**A** As the child's world expands, so should the curriculum. Children's interest in the world naturally expands in accordance with their cognitive and emotional development. Kindergarten students have a natural interest in what is close at hand, 5<sup>th</sup> grade students have the ability to think at the state or bioregional level, high school students at the national and global level. At each level, though, students are grounding their study of large-scale issues in a solid and personal understanding of how things work in their own community.

*As the child's world expands, so should the curriculum*

*Preschool - K - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10 - 11 - 12 - beyond*

*Grade in school*

*Home - school - neighborhood - community - watershed - state - nation - globe ...*

*Study area, each grounded in the ones before*



*Students become capable of increasingly complex projects as they mature.*



## Civic Engagement and Place-based Learning

*“Drops of waters and rootlets unite! Give me your students yearning to be free! It’s a simple proposition really. Bring education back into the neighborhood. Connect students with adult mentors, conservation commissions, and local businesses. Get teachers and students into the community, into the woods, and on the streets—closer to beauty and true grit. Get the town engineer, the mayor, and the environmental educators onto the schoolyard and inside the four walls of the school. These are the places we all belong.”*

– David Sobel (2004)

**W**e have said that place-based learning without a strong and enduring civic engagement component is not a sustainable program. This brief chapter further explores the relationship between place-based learning, civic engagement and long-term program success.

Rooting educational programming deeply in the local community, both physically and thematically, is proving to be an effective strategy for increasing public dialogue and other forms of civic engagement around issues of land use and sustainability. This community dialogue then often circles back, pulling the school into a meaningful role in community life. In many PBL programs, community-wide civic engagement opportunities are built in from the beginning and are seen as fundamental to the success of the PBL endeavor.

### Civic Engagement Skills Development

PBL approaches that include strong civic engagement opportunities build concrete citizenship skills, such as the capacity to analyze and communicate information for creative problem solving and the ability to create and facilitate effective dialogues. PBL curricula often emphasize learning how to listen to other points of view, critical thinking skills, consensus building, and group goal setting and problem solving. In the process, public lands and communities become effective classrooms for teaching democracy skills.

Civic engagement benefits the students in a number of other ways. Involving students in the design phase of an educational initiative—letting them choose and design the work they want to do in community—is empowering. When they feel heard and appreciated, students’ sense of ownership, excitement and motivation grows. Understanding the significance of what they are learning and doing inspires students to work harder in their classes, and for their community.



Structured civic engagement opportunities also provide citizens with new ways to participate in the stewardship of public land and in the life of the school and students. Breaking down barriers between school, community and public lands builds social capital, community vitality, and strengthens civic society as a whole.

Human motivations to participate in community affairs—to act for the protection of our communities, the natural environment and cultural qualities of life—come directly from a strong sense of place and a deep concern for the landscapes and people of our home ground. People are most eager to take part in initiatives that they have helped to identify, about which they have solid information, and which they see as relevant to their lives. Civic engagement can then grow to mean not only a set of actions and efforts, but also a feeling of belonging—an experience of investment, ownership and stewardship for the local and regional communities to which citizens belong.

## Multi-Stakeholder Engagement in Program Planning

Civic engagement can take many forms, but our experience has shown us that in every case, involving stakeholder groups, including teachers and students, in project design from the very start builds a more enduring program. Not only does the public lands manager or educator build buy-in by involving key stakeholders, but also, the educational product is very likely to be more effective and have greater real-world legitimacy.

For example, in developing A Forest for Every Classroom, the program partners held a series of focus-group sessions throughout the state and invited a range of stakeholders to discuss how forest stewardship should be taught in the classroom setting. Scientists, foresters, woodworkers, land managers and teachers came to together to inform the development of the program.

Civic engagement is fundamentally about relationship building with a broad range of stakeholders. If a strong and effective commitment is made to civic engagement, then the PBL approach can foster a widespread investment in stewardship of local and national resources.

## Strategies for Civic Engagement

The following is a list of strategies for land managers and teachers alike to ensure effective civic engagement in your programs. These strategies were developed through a series of gatherings of public lands managers and their community partners.

### 1) Learn about your community

- Cultivate an intimate knowledge of the local community: its landscapes and history, its schools and civic organizations.
- Go out to where people are—don't wait for them to come to you.
- Read local publications such as newsletters and circulars.
- Develop strong question-asking and listening skills on your staff. Model these skills in your workplace.

### 2) Develop authentic community relationships

- Learn about local people as people.
- Go into the inner offices of local stakeholders, and invite them into yours.
- Regularly put out meaningful, detailed information about your work through blogs, emails, and newsletters.
- Become a part of things—join a local board and become an active member of local organizations.
- Use your influence to be helpful, even when it doesn't benefit you.
- Using volunteers and key community supporters, throw a really good party (promotion, food, childcare and celebratory elements).



### 3) Continually seek and establish relevance in your program

- Demonstrate links between history and contemporary interests and needs.
- Train staff in dealing with sensitive issues with the public.
- Use your site as a springboard for the study of contemporary issues.
- Create diverse opportunities for engagement.
- Don't isolate natural and cultural resource stewardship objectives from other social objectives. Make clear linkages to a range of local concerns such as health, obesity, affordable housing, land use, public access to recreational land and facilities, quality after-school care, substance use/abuse, transportation and public safety.

### 4) Reach deeply and broadly to diverse stakeholders

- Involve a range of stakeholder groups in program design, implementation and evaluation.
- Pull in all possible perspectives, coming from a range of communities of place and interest—both immediate stakeholders and people with no obvious links.
- Pull in the disenfranchised or disinterested and give them authentic voice. Make visible the value you place on public voice.
- Encourage your local communities to undertake community-wide visioning sessions as part of their PBL program.

### 5) Develop effective partnerships

- Share mission statements.
- Dialogue to develop a sense of common purpose and a vision for your collaboration.
- Do a small, concrete project together early on, to learn how to work effectively with one another before the stakes are high.
- Give up something.
- Share credit.
- Follow their advice.
- Rely on their strengths—don't do it all.

### 6) Know what's possible

- Know where you have room to flex within your regulations, and how to do it.

### 7) Take time

- Know that you will need to repeat these processes over time as people and issues change. Prepare for that.
- Carry out civic engagement approaches internally, to mend rifts and have a solid core before reaching out.
- Document successes and failures, share, and learn from them. Examine lessons from past activities.

## Community Visioning: The PLACE project

Community visioning offers one strong avenue to build a culture of civic engagement. For example, the PLACE project (Place-based Landscape Analysis and Community Education), a partnership program of Shelburne Farms National Historic Landmark and the University of Vermont, includes a major community visioning and goal setting process that invites the entire community to envision the community's future together, grounded in an understanding of its natural and cultural heritage. In the PLACE model, the community vision component ensures that student service learning projects and civic engagement in education and stewardship will be driven by the community's picture of its desired future: the vision it holds of itself.

When the entire community develops a vision together, with a list of high priority projects or desired action steps, public lands emerge as resources for the whole community to use and care for. When students, teachers, and school administrators are engaged in community visioning, then students and schools become viewed as participants, potential workforce, and leaders. The shared goal becomes realizing the community vision: the health and well being of the community, its resources, and every member of it.







## Getting Started: Launching a Place-based Learning and Civic Engagement Program In Your Community

*“Love is where attentiveness to nature starts, and responsibility towards one’s home landscape is where it leads.”*

– John Elder (1998)

### Organizational Goals for Place-based Learning and Civic Engagement

Whether part of a school, community organization, or public lands entity, PBL needs to be relevant to your goals and objectives or it won’t survive. PBL activities can meet a wide range of organizational goals from educational learning goals, to public outreach and resource management goals. But to insure that PBL is consistent and complementary to what your institution is trying to accomplish, your goals and objectives need to be clearly articulated and transparent to you, to your partners, and to your stakeholders. The program cannot feel like an add-on to already overburdened staff; it should feel integral to achieving existing goals.

The worksheet in Appendix C will guide you through assessing your organizational goals and identifying specific opportunities that could be leveraged by PBL-CE programming in the areas of:

- Resource Management
- Community Relations
- Financial Stability
- Administration/ Personnel

### School and Community Readiness

Assessing the readiness of potential schools or communities with whom you might partner is a critical aspect of developing new program approaches. Public lands educators working with schools to develop and implement new curricula have found that they can have the greatest impact when they work with schools that:

- Have already implemented some place-based approaches and are deliberately working to expand their focus on the landscape and human communities around them.
- Have policies and programs in place that encourage student involvement in the community, either through service learning opportunities, or internships and mentoring beyond school boundaries.
- Have at least a small core of teachers who are ready and willing to implement PBL strategies.
- Build in meaningful access to teacher professional development time.
- Demonstrate strong support for PBL and CE from school administration.



With limited resources and the goal to create sustained PBL and CE programming, organizations should start by working with schools that are close to a tipping point. Rather than working with schools that have the capacity to implement PBL and CE on their own, or that are facing such significant disruptions that they need more foundational interventions than PBL, choose schools at which some limited additional investment in time and money can have a large and lasting impact. Then, as funds allow, work with other schools, targeting programming to their current needs.

## A Strong Base of Understanding, Engagement, and Support

Launching a place-based learning and civic engagement program in your school and community requires the gradual building of understanding, enthusiasm and commitment. As you begin to develop your program, build a foundation of knowledge for administrators within your partner agencies, organizations and schools by providing them with packets of information that include quotes and facts that prove program success (see [www.promiseofplace.org](http://www.promiseofplace.org) as a starting point). Or invite experienced place-based practitioners from other areas to the school or partner organization/agency to meet with administrators to discuss their experiences. For suggestions on ways to build parent and community support, see page 21.

We have also found that a combination of engaging exercises and strong organizational tools works best to initiate a dialogue with teachers, community organizations, and public land managers about community needs and priorities for potential PBL programs. The exercises found in Appendix B have proven helpful. *Convivial Research* helps you to tap the knowledge of diverse participants in a fun and social activity. *Sense of Place Map* and *Mapping Community Place-Based Learning Opportunities* give you a non-linear way to engage staff, community members or educators in thinking about the particular assets of their region. *Connecting People to Place* offers you a

compendium of “hip pocket activities” for when you find yourself out and about with a group of people interested in getting to know the local area better.

The ideal place-based learning project meets the teacher’s educational objectives, is consistent with statewide educational standards, and is relevant to the objectives of the community and/or the public land entity. Not every project meets an objective within each sphere, but in planning CE projects it helps to know what each partner values, hopes to accomplish, and has the capacity to manage. Projects that fall far outside of stated community objectives, teaching goals and the work plans of cooperating agencies may work for the student, but it’s likely that the energy required to support the project won’t be there from the cooperating agency. In other words, it makes sense to stay on task, and on mission for all partners.

The form in Appendix C will serve as an aid to guide you in planning your PBL and CE projects. It identifies the fit of the project with mission and goals of the partnering groups. It also spells out desired outcomes and a timeline, and provides an opportunity to consider the resources needed and the follow-up required after the project is completed. If possible, use it as a discussion tool, filling it out together with your core project partners to ensure both ownership and the best possible answers.

*Look for ways to engage community partners with expertise and resources that compliment your own.*





## Tips From Teachers!

### Here's the voice of experience from the teacher and educator perspective:



*Building a strong PBL program takes time, persistence, and a heavy dose of creative thinking. Over several years of PBL trainings led by the Center for Place-based Learning and Community Engagement and Forest for Every Classroom, experienced teachers and public lands educators have identified these tips for success.*

#### START SMALL

- ★ Start by working within existing programs and school schedules, then use the results of your project as evidence that you need more time or flexible class schedule.
- ★ Take on a small discrete service learning project in an area close to school.
- ★ Identify projects or units of study already being done that address PBL or CE, even if they haven't yet been labeled as such.
- ★ Identify existing community partnerships and build on these.
- ★ Divide up big projects into manageable units and divvy them between classes or spread out over multiple years and class groups.

#### PLAN AHEAD

- ★ Ask for help and partner involvement early in the planning phase rather than only in the implementation phase. Planning advice and support is a relatively easy way to build buy-in early.
- ★ Begin working with teachers early so that they can apply for coordinated course times.
- ★ Schedule field trip days in advance so other teachers know students will be gone and parents can save the date for volunteering.

- ★ Encourage the school to set aside a bi-weekly field trip day for community projects.
- ★ Think creatively about transportation options: public transportation, walking or biking, using a community van, etc.

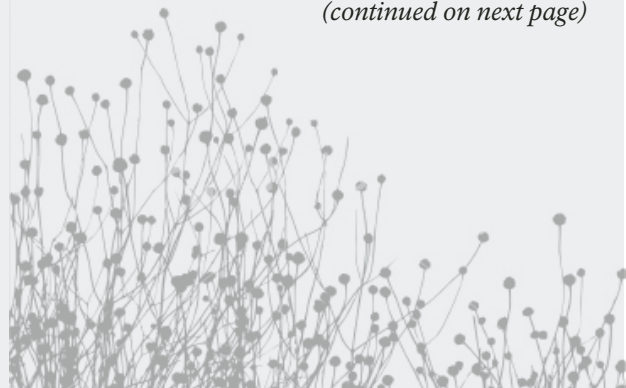
#### BUILD SCHOOL AND TEACHER INVOLVEMENT

- ★ Showcase successes from other schools that have used similar programs.
- ★ Ask teachers about their needs, challenges and aspirations, then invite them to explore how a PBL project might meet those needs. Suggest some possibilities.
- ★ Build involvement around specific projects one teacher at a time rather than trying to build broad support at a staff meeting.
- ★ Partner with other grades or classes that share a common curricular interest.

#### WORK IN TEACHER PLANNING AND PREPARATION TIME

- ★ Plan a PBL and CE planning meeting in the summer in a retreat setting.
- ★ Designate or create a position to facilitate planning, integration and community coordination of PBL and CE and other experiential education projects.
- ★ Budget for teacher planning time in the summer.
- ★ Build release time into project budgets to fund substitutes for planning time.

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### **ADDRESS GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS/STANDARDS**

- ★ Research grade level expectations or standards for your state and highlight those that work with your project ideas.
- ★ Integrate PBL and CE into the regular curriculum.
- ★ Consider process standards such as inquiry skills, which are naturally addressed through real world projects.
- ★ Find opportunities for students to apply literacy and numeracy skills. Real world projects provide an authentic need for data collection and analysis, reading for understanding, and writing for an audience.
- ★ Create evaluation rubrics and task lists that are appropriate for the activity.

### **BRIDGE DISCIPLINARY GAPS**

- ★ Meet with educators as a team to find common ground where teachers can work toward shared objectives while maintaining individual teaching styles.
- ★ Provide data on content such as forest inventory, and develop economic and math curricular ideas
- ★ Hold one meeting a month that focuses on integrating interdisciplinary groups.

### **PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SPECIFIC TO PBL**

- ★ Call in the professional development providers to offer training at the school or to a group of project partners.
- ★ Provide opportunities for peer-to-peer sharing/ professional learning.
- ★ Develop a guest lecturer program – natural resource professionals trained to teach class for a block/period (instead of typical substitutes) so teacher can leave for professional development.

### **YOUTH VOICE: BUILD STUDENT LEADERSHIP**

- ★ Let students identify a problem that students are really interested in: their interest is the starting point of discovery.
- ★ Find a connection or “hook” that helps students understand how the project will affect them, their families, neighbors and friends.
- ★ Create task forces: students from each community or neighborhood the school serves are in charge of creating community connections.
- ★ Be sensitive to other demands on student time—like sports and theater activities.
- ★ Involve students in logistics: put them in charge of organizing themselves and their parents for field outings.
- ★ Involve local college students in projects (most colleges have a community outreach office that helps interested students connect with local organizations and schools).

