

# Deeper Learning for All: State PBL Ecosystems

Increasingly, states are focusing on developing durable skills that all students, especially Black and Brown students, need to be successful in the future and developing Graduate Profiles to define what students need to do to be successful in college, career, and life. For the last 30 years, PBLWorks has focused exclusively on building the capacity of educators at all levels to use and support Project Based Learning (PBL) as core pedagogy through high-quality professional learning based on Gold Standard PBL. PBLWorks has long-held core beliefs that PBL, when done well, can...

- Transform students by inspiring them to think differently about themselves as learners, collaborators, and leaders
- Prepare students for success in college, career, and life
- Lead students to master core academic content and build success skills
- Advance educational equity and empower youth furthest from opportunity
- Enable teachers to make a difference in their students' lives

In the last decade, there has been mounting evidence that PBL has a positive impact on student outcomes beyond test scores for all students, including Black and Brown students. Most recently, PBLWorks partnered with a What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) researcher to review and analyze PBL studies using randomized controlled trials to answer the question: To what extent does PBL align to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Evidence Levels 1 and 2? Of the 22 rigorous peer-reviewed published studies of PBL examined, four studies of PBL align ESSA Evidence Levels 1 and 2. Read [here](#).

## In this Report

- About PBL Works
- State PBL Ecosystem: The Model
- The Model in Action: Spotlight on Kentucky
- A Model that Works: Evidence Base
- Reflections: Insights for SEAs
- Interested in Learning More: Contact Us

## About PBLWorks

The Buck Institute for Education (dba PBLWorks) is a national nonprofit located in Novato, California. Our **mission** is to build the capacity of teachers to design and implement high-quality projects and for school leaders to create the conditions for teachers to do so. Our **vision** is for *all* students, especially, Black and Brown students, to engage in high-quality Project Based Learning (PBL) to deepen learning and achieve success in college, career, and life.

Since 1999, we have offered high-quality professional development in Project Based Learning (PBL) to educators in all 50 states and across the globe, including in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Costa Rica, Chile, China, the Dominican Republic, England, India, Ireland, Jordan, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, Romania, Qatar, Spain, and Singapore. In the last decade our reach has extended to over 200,000 educators.

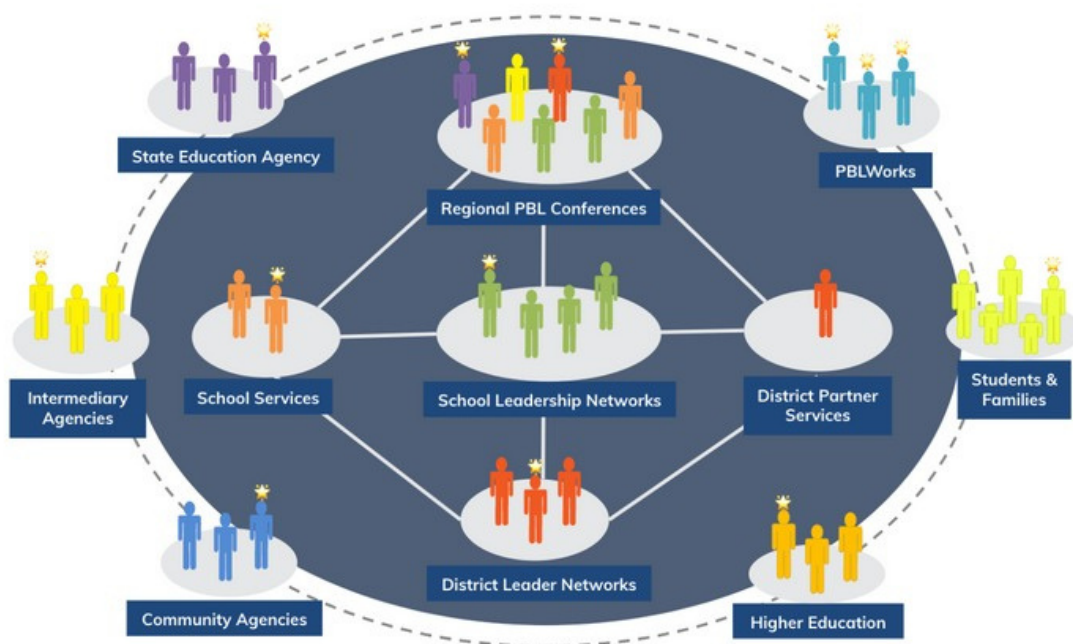
Our team of 52 full-time and 70 part-time staff members facilitates professional learning for teachers, coaches, and school and district leaders across the US and world. Our team includes highly talented, experienced teachers, school leaders, and district leaders with deep PBL expertise and experience using PBL to transform classrooms and schools. You can read full-time staff bios [here](#) and part-time staff bios [here](#).



## State PBL Ecosystem: The Model

PBLWorks works with state partners to co-create an ecosystem to scale high quality Project Based Learning (PBL) statewide, using a systems approach that builds on existing state assets (e.g., policies, relationships, leadership, partnerships, structures) to create sustainable networks for learning so that more students engage in high quality Project Based Learning.

### State Ecosystem for Scaling PBL



In a State PBL Ecosystem, we engage a variety of stakeholders within and outside of the K–12 educational system in different ways. As shown above in the diagram, State Ecosystem for Scaling PBL, the Model includes three essential components:

- *Professional Learning: Comprehensive and coordinated professional learning*
- *Scaling Partners: Sustained support from a variety of stakeholders from across the State*
- *PBL Champions: Key stakeholders with influence who advocate strongly for PBL as core pedagogy*

## Professional Learning

As shown in the center of the diagram above, the Model is based on a comprehensive and coordinated approach to service design and delivery that enables state partners to engage educators in high-quality professional learning from across the State. Together, PBLWorks and State partners co-create a PBL ecosystem that is customized for unique state contexts and partner needs. Core components of the professional learning include:

- **School Leader Networks:** School leaders are at the center of the model because they are key instructional leaders who have the greatest opportunity in the system to affect change at the classroom level. We start with school leaders so that they get a head start creating the school conditions necessary for teachers to make the instructional changes needed to facilitate high quality PBL as a core pedagogy. These conditions include: Vision, Culture, Infrastructure, Capacity Building, and Continuous Improvement.
- **District Partner Services:** District partners play an essential role in the ecosystem, serving as “proof points” that can offer educators a visible opportunity to observe what is possible when high quality PBL is implemented across a district. PBLWorks creates long-term engagements with districts focused on changing outcomes for all students using high quality PBL as a core pedagogy. District Partner Services include layered professional learning for district and school leadership teams and classroom teachers.
- **District Leader Network:** As influential leaders in communities and states, district leaders have a unique opportunity to create coherence at a systems level. Together, their influence can help shape key policy and regulatory conditions across systems to ensure sustained implementation of high quality PBL. District Leader Networks engage leadership teams from districts across a state in learning about high quality PBL, identifying opportunities and sharing common changes, while creating greater synergy and collaboration within and across regions.
- **Regional PBL Conferences:** These conferences are regionally based local conferences co-hosted by PBLWorks and intermediary agency partners, offering professional learning at scale to large numbers of educators across regions or the State.

## Scaling Partners

Scaling partners, shown on the outer circle of the Model, are essential. They include a variety of stakeholders from across the State who provide sustained support to ensure that the conditions are in place to establish and sustain a State PBL Ecosystem. As part of the model, PBLWorks and State partners create a PBL State Steering Committee that establishes a vision for what students need to know and do, creates and monitors a scaling plan, provides ongoing support and guidance, and elevates the importance of the work across the State. Key scaling partners include:

**State Education Agencies:** As the primary partner, State education agencies (SEAs) play a critical role in making the State PBL Ecosystem happen. SEAs can leverage their unique position for advocacy and policy to support intermediary agencies, districts, and other stakeholders interested in scaling deeper learning in their systems.

- **Intermediary Agencies:** Intermediary agencies are essential scaling partners for scaling PBL across a state. Because they are designed to support regions, they provide a statewide structure to offer PBL professional learning at scale as co-hosts with PBLWorks. They can also provide support in a variety of other ways, including (and not limited to): recruitment, awareness building, partnership development, and advocacy for PBL.
- **Community Partners:** Partnerships with community partners, within and outside of K12, are essential for the long-term sustainability of statewide scaling. Community agencies, teachers' associations, philanthropic partners, businesses, and corporations play a strategic role, helping to raise awareness, provide resources, and elevate the importance of high quality PBL within a state. Community partners can create greater relevance for PBL by serving as thought partners, resource providers, and critical friends of teachers and students as they engage in PBL.
- **Higher Education Partners:** Institutes of higher education (IHEs) play a key role in building the capacity of teachers and school leaders in states. As partners, IHEs can provide support in a variety of ways including (and not limited to): recruitment, awareness building, partnership cultivation, advocacy for PBL, and co-hosting professional development. Ideally, these partnerships could lead to the collaborative redesign of Teacher Education Programs to offer preservice PBL courses and certification and create a pipeline of PBL-trained teachers who enter the field ready to use high quality PBL out of the gate.
- **Students and Families:** For high quality PBL to have an impact on student learning and outcomes, PBL needs to be relevant to students' lives and rooted in a meaningful context. Students and families also play an important role supporting a State PBL Ecosystem. As the consumers of education, they can bring assets and insights into the Ecosystem that are not visible to other stakeholders. They can also serve as powerful advocates, providing testimonials and examples of what's possible through PBL.

## **PBL Champions**

As shown in the diagram above with stars, PBL Champions are needed across stakeholder groups to build and grow a State PBL Ecosystem. PBL Champions are stakeholders who are opinion leaders with credibility and influence and who are early adopters of PBL. Based on Everett Rogers (2003), the “father of diffusion of innovation,” early adopter opinion leaders are key to spreading an innovation by using their credibility and influence to help speed up the rate at which others take up a new innovation. Because early adopters are right behind innovators, the first to adopt an innovation, and not too far ahead of the majority of adopters, they are trusted sources to whom others look to when deciding to adopt an innovation.



### The Model in Action: Spotlight on Kentucky

Together, KDE, PBLWorks, and a wide variety of stakeholders in Kentucky have established a strong and growing PBL Ecosystem. As shown in the map below, educators in 68% (82) of Kentucky’s 120 counties engaged in PBLWorks professional learning!

This Partnership was initiated by Kentucky’s former Education Commissioner Dr. Jason E. Glass who reached out to PBLWorks to support the State’s United We Learn initiative. KDE crafted the State’s vision with input from over 1,000 stakeholders in Kentucky communities through listening tours, community town halls, and empathy interviews:

1. Vibrant learning experiences for every student
2. Accelerating innovation in schools, especially in assessment
3. Creating a bold new future through collaboration with communities

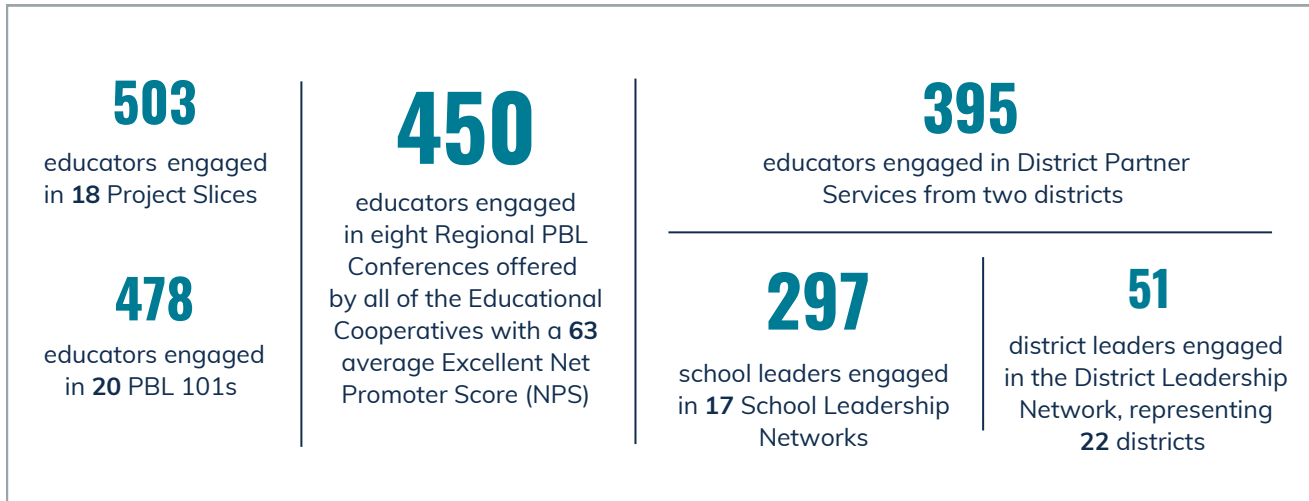
### Kentucky PBL Ecosystem - What the Numbers Say

As shown in the map below, educators in 68% (82) of Kentucky’s 120 counties engaged in PBLWorks professional learning!

*PBLWorks Service Delivery in Counties in Kentucky: 2021–2022, 2022–2023, 2023–2024 School Years*



PBLWorks has delivered a total of 385 professional learning experiences since the inception of the partnership in the 2021–2022 school year. In total, to date, 2,174 educators across the State of Kentucky have engaged in PBLWorks professional learning. This includes:



### Kentucky PBL Ecosystem - What Educators Say



Dr. Jason E. Glass, **former commissioner**, Kentucky Department of Education (KDE), shares how a partnership with PBL helps educators move closer to the State’s vision: *“We are excited about this ongoing partnership with PBLWorks and how it amplifies the kinds of deeper learning experiences we want Kentucky students to experience...Kentuckians are calling for bold changes to education in our state around giving our students the kinds of learning experiences that prepare them for an automated, lightning-fast, globally interconnected economy... Our best way of going about that is to change the kinds of experiences our students have in classrooms—making those experiences hands-on, authentic, meaningful and connected to the kinds of work they will need to do outside of school...PBLWorks helps move us from just talking about these shifts to the real work of implementing them in classrooms across Kentucky. This will give our educators the supports they need to design experiences for students that get them ready for that new future.”*

## Kentucky PBL Ecosystem - What Educators Say



David N. Cook, **director** of KDE's Division of Innovative Learning, Office of Continuous Improvement and Support, shares: *"Over the last three years, the state of Kentucky has created a statewide effort to create more vibrant learning experiences for all learners in the state through a focus on Deeper Learning. Central to our deeper learning efforts has been our amazing partnership with PBLWorks. This partnership has served as the foundation for providing the professional learning necessary for one-third of our teachers in the state to immerse themselves in the PBLWorks curriculum to build cultures of PBL in each teacher's classroom as well as with school and district leaders. I have been impressed from day one with the structure of the curriculum for teachers and leaders and the depth of learning that each teacher receives. I have also been impressed with the structure that first brings school leaders to the table to understand how to lead teachers to a PBL culture as well as the parallel learning done by district leaderships. This holistic approach rather than top-down is what sets PBLWorks apart. I would highly recommend to any education agency that they consider the PBLWorks comprehensive approach to Gold Standard PBL."*



**"Students don't remember worksheets. They remember projects and making a difference."**

**Nehemiah, student in Kentucky**

Nehemiah, **student** in Kentucky, reminds us that "students don't remember worksheets. They remember projects and making a difference. Regular school work can increase knowledge, but PBL can do so much more!"



Brianna Greenhill, **chemistry teacher** in Morehead, Kentucky, shares how she shifted from traditional teaching to PBL with support from PBLWorks and has “never looked back.” Listen [here](#).

James Hood, **principal** at Rodburn Elementary School, shares about his engagement in the School Leadership Network and how he and his team learned how to “present this [PBL] in a way that was not just one more thing we were having our teachers do.” Listen [here](#).

### **Bright Spot - PBL Works for All Students**

Research shows that PBL works for all students, including students furthest from opportunity who need the greatest support. Dr. Azurdee Garland, vocational and rehabilitation coordinator and instructor in the Kentucky Department of Juvenile Justice, engaged in PBLWorks PBL 101 workshop and the School Leader Network. As a result of her engagement and inspiration for PBL as a way to engage and inspire her students, Dr. Garland and her team hosted the first annual PBL Statewide Event with participation by students, teachers, and support staff and support from the Kentucky Department of Education, Kentucky Educational Collaborative for State Agency Children (KECSAC), and BreakFree Education. At the event, students exhibited their work from projects. For example, students shared about the Unleashed Project that challenged students to design the most cost-effective, fastest, and tallest roller coaster for the Kingdom of Kentucky. Students delved into force, motion, roller coaster design, and marbles to showcase their work.



*Photo courtesy of Wes Blake, Kentucky Department of Education*

## State PBL Ecosystem - Key Components

All of the professional learning in State PBL Ecosystems is important for scaling high-quality professional learning across a State. In Kentucky, Project Slices, School Leadership Networks, District Partner Services, and Regional PBL Conferences stand out as particularly helpful to establishing the Ecosystem.

### Project Slices - Experience is the Best Teacher

In Kentucky, PBLWorks engaged 503 educators in 18 Project Slices. In a one-day Project Slice, educators are immersed in a “slice” of a project as a learner. Project Slice participants engage as learners in a transformative one-day project that models the key features of the PBL process. This workshop helps build an understanding of the what and why of PBL for educators. The intention of the slice is to model high-quality projects that are rich with academic content and success skills. PBLWorks professional learning is grounded in the idea that PBL is the way students learn content, not the thing they do after they have learned the content. The day mirrors the flow of a larger project. Teams work together to build knowledge, understanding, and success skills, and develop and critique products and answers to the driving question. At key moments throughout the day, participants will be encouraged to “put on their teacher hats” and reflect on the pedagogical moves they are experiencing as PBL learners and the implications for their contexts. The workshop culminates with team presentations of their products, followed by structured reflection on what they have learned about PBL.

### School Leader Networks - Getting a Head Start to Make it Happen in Classrooms

Acknowledging schools as a primary unit of change in a systems-change model, School Leader Networks are at the center of the PBL Ecosystem. Using Gold Standard PBL as core pedagogy at a school level is a significant change from traditional instructional approaches. For teachers to make the instructional moves required to shift to PBL, school leaders need to put conditions in place that enable and support these changes. School Leader Networks give leaders the “head start” they need to understand what Gold Standard PBL is, why it works, how it works, and what they need to do to create the conditions to make it happen in their schools, including the specific shifts they need to make in their own leadership practices. School Leader Networks provide a web of sustained learning, sharing, and support that like-minded school leaders from across a state or region can access long after the Network formally concludes.

In Kentucky, PBLWorks has facilitated 17 School Leadership Networks, serving 297 school leaders from counties across the State. Over the course of a year, school leaders learn together what it takes to transform student learning using PBL through a series of workshops focused on the conditions needed for teachers to be able to use Gold Standard PBL with all students: Vision, Culture, Infrastructure, Capacity Building, and Continuous Improvement.



They also engage in Leadership Learning Walks, visiting each other's schools to see how each leader has applied what they learned from their experience in the Network in their schools. The Network concludes with School Leader Presentations of Learning, where school leaders come together to share their learning and reflections with a panel of their peers based on this driving question: What leadership moves have you made to create the conditions necessary to implement Gold Standard PBL? During the event, participants celebrated their successes, shared key lessons learned, and identified areas in which they want to continue to grow.

*"It has been wonderful to meet new people in my regional area through the PBL School Leader Network and hear about their successes (and bumps in the road). I feel like I am on this journey with others, not just by myself."*

**April Ratliff, Instructional Coach, Rowan County**

### Districts - Going Deeper & Inspiring What's Possible

Superintendents and their districts play an important role in creating and promoting a State PBL Ecosystem. As one of the most influential leaders in public education, superintendents can leverage their power to influence policy at the local and state levels, helping to shape the conditions for the PBL Ecosystem at the State level. PBLWorks partners with superintendents and their districts in two unique ways: District Partner Services and the District Leader Network.

Participation in these two services offers superintendents and district teams the opportunity to increase their leadership skills, network with other district leaders, and support the development of the PBL Ecosystem. To date, PBLWorks has reached 13% (22) of Kentucky's 173 school districts through these services.



PBLWorks is partnering with Allen County Public Schools (ACPS) and Bullitt County Public Schools (BCPS) to scale PBL as a core pedagogy districtwide. PBLWorks provides District Services that include layered professional learning and support for district leadership teams to create coherence, for school leadership teams to create the conditions for PBL (i.e., Vision, Culture, Infrastructure, Capacity Building, and Continuous Improvement), and teachers to adapt and implement Gold Standard PBL with all students. District partnerships are designed for impact and require strategic implementation and sustained support over multiple years. For example, both ACPS and BCPS have made tremendous progress scaling PBL:

- Allen County Public Schools: ACPS is a small district serving 3,126 students. To date, 204 educators have engaged in PBL professional learning, and 84% of the district's 190 teachers have engaged in PBL 101 workshops!
- Bullitt County Public Schools: BCPS is a larger district serving 12,852 students. To date, 191 educators have engaged in PBL professional learning, and 17% of the district's 795 teachers have engaged in PBL 101 workshops.

*“The opportunity to improve the student experience through meaningful and cognitively demanding work was something I wanted to be a part of. As a district partner with PBLWorks, we use Gold Standard PBL to elevate our graduate profile and design for transformational classroom experiences.”*

**Dr. Chasity Shipley, Instructional Supervisor, Allen County Public Schools**

These districts can serve as beacons for PBL, making visible the impact of PBL when the conditions are in place for teachers to use PBL as a core pedagogy.

This can be very inspiring for other superintendents and district leaders as well as educators, policymakers, and community members.

PBLWorks is also facilitating a District Leader Networks to bring together districts who share a vision and commitment to growing PBL. The Network is designed for district leaders to learn with and from each other by engaging in interactive learning experiences, sharing successes and challenges, and engaging in thought-provoking conversations. The focus is on accelerating and strengthening the systemic implementation of PBL to ensure that all students, especially Black and Brown students, experience at least two Gold Standard projects a year. To date, 51 district leaders have engaged in the District Leadership Network, representing 22 districts across the State.

*“In our district, Project Based Learning isn't just an educational approach; it's a transformative process that empowers students to discover the joy of learning through real-world experiences. During our partnership with PBLWorks, our teachers have witnessed the profound impact PBL has on cultivating critical thinking, collaboration, and lifelong learning. In education, the true value of PBL lies not just in the projects completed but in the empowered minds and inspired hearts it shapes, paving the way for a future generation ready to tackle the complexities of our ever-evolving world.”*

**Brandy Carver, Assistant Superintendent, Rowan County Schools**

### Regional PBL Conferences

Regional PBL Conferences offer professional learning to large numbers of educators at one time. To date, 1,196 educators have engaged in Regional PBL Conferences offered by all eight Educational Cooperatives. These conferences offered educators easy access to high-quality PBLWorks professional learning that they otherwise would not have in close proximity to where they live.

## A Model that Works: An Evidence Base

The State PBL Ecosystem is a strategy that grew out of a few key proven concepts that PBLWorks has developed, tested, and iterated on over time. PBLWorks has a wide array of evidence to support the key components of the Ecosystem, collected through research studies, observations, surveys, interviews, focus groups, and testimonials. This section includes evidence that highlights the primary components of the Ecosystem. PBLWorks continues to collect and use formative evidence to inform and refine this strategy.

## Professional Learning

For the last 30 years, PBLWorks has focused exclusively on building the capacity of educators across the world to use high quality PBL as core pedagogy, based on proprietary Gold Standard frameworks that distinguish PBL as a “main course” (i.e., standards-aligned and intellectually challenging instruction used as core pedagogy for all students) from other versions of PBL that are “dessert” (i.e., fun and engaging projects used as incentives for some students). PBLWorks frameworks distinguish PBL as the “main course,” and are the basis of the design of all professional learning: [Gold Standard PBL Essential Design Elements](#) and [Project Based Teaching Practices](#).

PBLWorks has strong evidence that its professional learning has an impact on their practice and student learning. PBLWorks professional learning is consistently rated by thousands of educators every year as excellent with average Net Promoter Scores in the high 50s and satisfaction rates over 97%. Overall, educators love PBLWorks professional development because it is learner-centered, highly engaging, and designed using PBL as a model. It is very common for participants to share feedback that reflects this sentiment: “This is the best professional development I have ever attended.”

Over the last decade, PBLWorks has engaged in research studies that show the impact of professional development on student outcomes. PBLWorks designed and facilitated professional learning for Knowledge in Action, a two-year randomized controlled trial (RCT) of 3,645 students in five large urban districts engaged in both AP Environmental Science and AP U.S. Government and Politics PBL courses and traditional courses. Researchers from the University of Southern California (USC) found that students in AP PBL courses outperformed students in traditional AP courses by eight percentage points.

Results for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds were comparable to their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. For teachers who taught AP PBL for a second year, students in the AP PBL courses outperformed peers in traditional classrooms by ten10 percentage points. PBLWorks designed and facilitated professional development for this study. [Read here.](#)

A comparison study of PBLWorks teacher services delivered in Lindsay Unified School District shows improved outcomes in standardized tests across content areas for Black and Brown students in grades K–12. These results are particularly promising given that Lindsay students are 90% Latinx, and 100% are eligible for free and reduced lunch. The study found that students with teachers who participated in PBLWorks professional learning between 2017 and 2019 demonstrated statistically significant growth in reading, math, and history, when compared to peers whose teachers did not participate in professional learning. [Read here.](#)

### School Leader Networks

The quality of school leadership matters. Effective leaders are essential for high-quality instruction, such as PBL, and have a marked influence on all aspects of a school, including achievement for all students. This influence is underscored strongly in a report on the impact of school leadership on student outcomes, published by the Wallace Foundation in 2021: *How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research*. A synthesis of over 20 years of longitudinal data on the impact of leadership and student outcomes shows that effective school leaders have a positive impact on student achievement, attendance, teacher satisfaction, and retention. Researchers also found that school leaders have a significant impact on school-level conditions, including: vision, culture, and professional learning for teachers. [Read here.](#)

Given the importance of effective school leadership on student achievement and school conditions, it is essential for school leaders to develop their own leadership knowledge, skills, and behaviors continuously. PBLWorks has designed and implemented School Leader Networks since 2017. In partnership with the Hawaii Department of Education and a local foundation, PBLWorks recruited and collaborated with an initial group of local school leaders who co-designed and engaged in the first School Leader Network that has served as the basis for five subsequent cohorts of school leaders in Hawaii, two Networks in Massachusetts, and 17 Networks in Kentucky.



The Hawaii Innovative School Leadership Network (HILN) is the first School Leader Network designed and facilitated by PBLWorks. The HILN model is designed to build the capacity of individual school leaders to create the conditions for high quality PBL in their schools so that teachers can use Gold Standard PBL with all students, especially Black and Brown students. To date, PBLWorks has facilitated six HILN cohorts, supporting 80 school leaders from public and charter schools. This represents 28% of the 293 public and charter school leaders in the Hawaii Department of Education (HIDOE) on all six of the Hawaiian Islands. Collectively, HILN leaders serve a total of over 25,000 students in their schools. With the support of external researchers from McREL, PBLWorks engaged in formative evaluation of the first HILN cohort, identifying areas of strength and improvement that informed future cohorts in Hawaii and the design of future School Leader Networks.



The story of Cyndi Rothdeutsch, principal of Kamali'i Elementary School in Maui, Hawaii, exemplifies what is possible through engagement in School Leader Networks. In 2023, PBLWorks awarded Rothdeutsch with the 2023 Individual PBL Champion Award, acknowledging her commitment to transforming learning for all students, using Gold Standard PBL. In 2017, during her first year as principal, she had the opportunity to participate in PBLWorks professional learning.

In 2020, Rothdeutsch was part of the Hawaii Innovative Leadership Network (HILN) where she built her capacity to create the conditions for high quality PBL at her school. She is an advocate and voice for PBL in her school, community, state, and beyond. A staff member at Rothdeutsch's school described her as "a champion for PBL at our school but also in our district and in the state of Hawaii."



Her candid storytelling and openness about the things that worked and didn't have illuminated the power of the journey toward HQPBL at our school." In order to make sure that racial and cultural equity is a priority, she provided time and space for place-based PBL units to be designed alongside Kupuna (i.e., "elders" in Hawaiian), as well as those that explore and honor the Hawaiian land that their school is built on. Rothdeutsch has established PBL as a central tenet in the way students learn at Kamali'i and has committed to 100% of students experiencing at least two high-quality projects a year, for every grade level and proficiency level. She has built accountability and support around that vision, and the commitment to PBL is called out in the school's academic plan and shared during family nights with all families and students. Rothdeutsch was acknowledged publicly in *Maui Now*. Read [here](#).

Building on the success of HILN, PBLWorks designed and facilitated the Massachusetts School Leader Network (M-SLN). The M-SLN is designed to build the capacity of school leadership teams to create the conditions for high quality PBL in their schools so that teachers can use Gold Standard PBL with all students, especially Black and Brown students. To date, PBLWorks has facilitated two M-SLN cohorts, serving over school leaders from 18 public and charter schools. With support from a local funder, the M-SLN model includes support for subsidized teacher professional development for M-SLN leaders and a robust data collection plan to help tell the story of the impact of the Network. Key results show a high percentage of students across demographic groups in Cohort 2 schools engaged at least two projects in the 2022–2023 school year:

- 68% of total students
- 75% of Black and Brown students
- 75% of students eligible for special services
- 70% of students learning English as a second language
- 75% of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch

Two schools whose leaders engaged in the M-SLN Cohort 2 made significant progress on 2023 Massachusetts state accountability targets. Greater Lowell Technical High School met 80% of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) accountability targets for 2023, and Milton Bradley Elementary School met 90% of their accountability targets.

In 2023, PBLWorks awarded M-SLN Cohort 2 Principal Vinnie Regan with the 2023 PBL School Champion Award for his commitment to PBL and leadership at Mary M. Walsh Elementary School in Springfield, Massachusetts. Mary Walsh serves 267 students in grades PK–5, of which nearly 90% are Black and Brown students. Under Regan’s leadership, students in his school have engaged in more than 60 projects since 2020. Teachers and staff at Mary Walsh collaborate and purposefully plan to ensure students achieve success by engaging in learning that is deep and meaningful. They have used PBL to complement their efforts to support students as they develop success skills, develop student identity, voice and choice, and promote authentic problem solving. The school holds regular Student Spotlights where students share their work with teachers, classmates, families, and community members.

“Without question, we’ve noticed greater enthusiasm and engagement around these projects with our students and that translates to deeper learning and also sparks creativity,” said Regan. Springfield’s Mayor and District Superintendent acknowledged Regan’s leadership publicly in the City of Springfield News. [Read here.](#)



### District Partner Services

Since 2017, PBLWorks has partnered with a diverse set of 51 school districts in 24 states across the country. In 2023, 75% of the 16 district partners served 50% or more Black and Brown students. PBLWorks led a multi-year research practice partnership, Scaling High Quality PBL for Deeper Learning Impact, examining the impact of District Partner Services on teacher practices and student outcomes. Research results from the 2019–2020 school year show high project implementation rates and increased success skills development across nearly 20,000 students in two districts, as shown in the two charts below. [Read here.](#)

#### Implementation Rates

Results	Pearl City Waipahu Complex Area	Manchester School District
Total students (NOTE: Roster matched data)	10, 274	9,003
Students engaged in at least two projects/year (matched data)	73%	68%
Students eligible for free and reduced priced lunch	71%	68%
Students learning English as a second language	73%	69%
Students eligible for special services	77%	67%

Success Skill Attainment

Results	Pearl City Waipahu Complex Area	Manchester School District
Total students (NOTE: Roster matched data)	160	400
Students engaged in at least two projects/year matched data)	93%	85%
Students eligible for free and reduced priced lunch	99%	97%
Students learning English as a second language	99%	98%
Students eligible for special services	95%	94%

Regional PBL Conferences

PBLWorks has a long and successful history of offering Regional PBL Conferences across the United States and world. From 2017 to 2021, PBLWorks partnered with a wide variety of educational and philanthropic partners to co-host 27 in-person and online “Institutes,” making high quality professional learning accessible to educators in multiple regions, including in Arkansas, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Ohio, Kansas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New York, Texas, and Virginia as well as Australia, Canada, Spain, and the United Kingdom. In 2023, PBLWorks revamped the partnership model to focus exclusively on experienced professional service providers who share our vision—for all students, especially Black and Brown students, to engage in high quality Project Based Learning to deepen their learning and achieve success in college, career, and life—to host an onsite Regional PBL Conference in their region or state in the United States to implement high quality Project Based Learning (PBL) in their classrooms, schools, and districts. Through Regional PBL Conferences, host partners have an opportunity to design and “host” a PBL conference “powered” by PBLWorks’ outstanding professional development.



## Reflections: Insights for SEAs

Like all complex, large-scale initiatives, the Kentucky State PBL Ecosystem has offered invaluable learning that offers State education agencies (SEAs) practical insights that can be used to scale high quality PBL statewide. While there are no easy solutions for complicated, collaborative, systems-level work, PBLWorks is driven by a strong commitment to quality and continuous improvement so that all students, especially Black and Brown students, engage in high quality PBL so that they are successful in college, career, and life. Toward that end, these insights are intended to support other State education agencies (SEAs) as they implement PBL statewide:

**1. Creating Coherence** - State education agencies (SEAs) have a multitude of initiatives across content areas, regions, and grade bands. For external partners, like PBLWorks, it can be very challenging to help educators make sense of how all of the different initiatives fit together and how PBL fits in. SEAs can play an important role in creating coherence for partners as well as educators. SEA leaders can help support coherence by creating and sharing frameworks that show how the multiple initiatives are interconnected.

**Recommendation: Consider PBL as the “umbrella” for all other initiatives.**

**2. Reframing Relationships** - PBLWorks considers its relationships with schools, districts, States, and other organizations as partnerships. This is a shift from transactional relationships focused on fulfilling contracts to collaborative partners doing good work together on behalf of students. PBLWorks focuses on building collaborative relationships centered on a partner’s assets and needs and working together to contextualize the work for maximum results. **Recommendation: Apply a partnership lens to vendors and contractors for greater synergy, support, and sustainability.**

**3. Recruiting Educators** - Getting the word out and recruiting educators to engage in professional learning delivered by an external partner requires a well thought out communications and marketing strategy and plan. Once there is a captive audience, PBLWorks can easily cultivate relationships and establish ongoing communication with educators. **Recommendation: Support recruitment using existing channels and relationships to increase awareness and optimize value proposition.**

## Interested in Learning More: Contact Us

Bob Lenz (he/him/his) • CEO, PBLWorks • 415.475.6718 • bob@pblworks.org  
Project Based Learning for All. Learn more at PBLWorks.org.