



(2025)

PBL



ROADBLOCKS

/What Gets in the Way

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A guide for teachers
of all experience levels.

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What gets in the way for Teachers?

As teachers across the CAST Schools network implement PBL in their classrooms, they've identified some common pain points that can occur as well as some tools and mentalities that have helped them move beyond these roadblocks.



PBL feels overwhelming and time-consuming.

Start small and use scaffolding.

Resources:

[CAST PBL Planning Document](#)
[PBL's Created by PBL Works](#)
[AI as PBL Planning Support](#)
[How to Turn Rubrics into Grades](#)

Like Training for a Marathon

You wouldn't run a marathon without training first. PBL is the same way—it feels overwhelming at first, but starting small and building up your stamina makes it much more doable. Your first project doesn't need to be perfect—it just needs to get you moving.

Reframe Your Mindset

Think of your first PBL unit as an experiment, not a final exam. The goal isn't to master it immediately—it's to learn what works and improve over time.

Be Confident

You already have all the skills you need to do this—you're just using them in a new way! Start with what you're comfortable with, and let PBL grow from there.

Students struggle with self-direction and accountability.

Explicitly teach collaboration and self-management skills.

Resources:

[Project Team Contract](#)
[Student Agency Rubric](#)
[Student Agency Mini-Posters](#)
[GRIT Rubric](#)
[nXu](#)

Building a Muscle

Students won't become self-directed overnight—it's like strengthening a muscle. The more they practice making decisions, setting goals, and managing tasks, the stronger those skills will become.

Focus on Student Growth

Your job isn't to control every step of the process—it's to guide them toward independence. If they struggle at first, that's a sign they're learning!

Messy is Okay

If your classroom feels messier than usual, that's not a sign of failure—it's a sign of deeper engagement. Real learning is messy, non-linear, and full of trial and error—and that's okay.

Assessment is challenging with PBL.

Use rubrics and ongoing formative assessments.

Resources:

[Self Assess, Reflect Choices](#)
[Student-Designed Success Criteria](#)
[Standards Based Assessment Article](#)
[Assessment in PBL Article](#)
[PBL Works Rubrics](#)
[Self-Directed Learning Rubrics](#)

Art vs Scantron

Assessing PBL is different because PBL is different. You wouldn't grade an artist based on how quickly they paint—you'd look at their technique, effort, and creativity. The same applies to students in PBL.

Mindset Shift

Instead of looking for right and wrong answers, look for evidence of thinking, progress, and creativity. That's what real-world assessment looks like!

Investment and Payoff

Yes, assessing PBL takes more effort upfront, but it pays off in deeper learning and better student engagement. Once you develop your go-to rubrics and reflection tools, it gets easier every time.

What gets in the way for Teachers?



I worry that I won't have the support I need to implement PBL.

Align PBL with school priorities and advocate for time.

Resources:

[Connecting Standards to PBL Framework](#)

[Evidence of NTN Impact in TX](#)

[Diffusion of Innovation Curve](#)

A Garden in Rocky Soil

If your school isn't fully on board with PBL yet, think of yourself as a gardener planting seeds in rocky soil. With persistence and proof of success, you'll start to change the landscape around you.

Be Practical

Start small—show admin how PBL aligns with existing standards rather than replacing them. A well-designed project meets learning goals while improving engagement.

Education Needs YOU

Many of the best educational shifts started with teachers taking the lead. You are part of a movement that's reshaping learning for the better—don't underestimate your impact!

Classroom management can be a challenge with PBL.

Set clear expectations and use structured group norms.

Resources:

[Community Agreements Guide](#)
[Helping Students Adjust to PBL](#)

Learning Can Be Controlled Chaos

Think of a kitchen during a busy dinner service. It's loud, it's chaotic, but everyone has a role and things get done. That's what productive PBL looks like.

Be Patient

If your classroom feels chaotic at first, that doesn't mean PBL isn't working—it means students are learning how to take ownership of their work. They need time to adjust.

Trust the Process

Start with clear norms, group agreements, and structured check-ins. Once students understand the expectations, you'll see more engagement and fewer disruptions.

1-on-1 work for PBL comes at the expense of the rest of the class.

Use blended learning strategies like playlists, station rotations, and trackers for the class.

Resources:

[Blended Learning Guide & Toolkit](#)

Set Up Your Sous-Chefs

At premier restaurants, the head chef doesn't do all the work. Sous-chefs work at stations with clear roles and recipes while the head chef works where help is needed. Blended learning can work the same way.

It's Practical

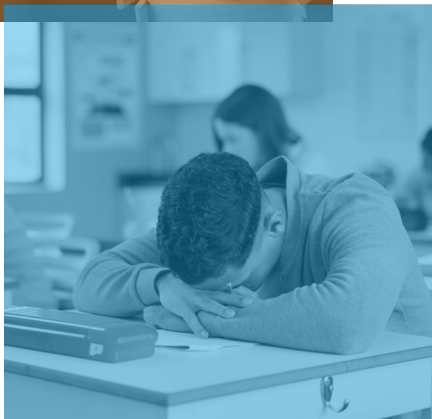
You can't be everywhere at once. Leaning on blended learning systems allows the rest of the class to actively learn while you're working one-on-one.

PBL Supported by RBL

Blended Learning doesn't replace PBL-- it enhances it by making students more independent and allowing you to give deeper, more focused support where it's needed. Think of it as creating a smoother workflow for you and your students.

What gets in the way for Students?

Teachers aren't the only ones who can get stuck when trying to embrace the challenges of PBL. Students experience struggles, too! Teachers have identified the common issues that students bring up that keep them from leaning in to PBL. Here are some of those issues along with resources to help address them and ideas for how to talk to students about them.



“This is too confusing!”

Provide clear instructions and scaffolding.

Resources:

[Essential Question Development Guide](#)

Validate & Reframe

“I get that this feels different from the way we usually learn. With PBL, there’s not always just one right answer, which can be tricky at first. But that also means you have more creative freedom in how you solve the problem. I’ll help you break it down into steps so it’s less overwhelming!”

“Think of it like a puzzle. At first, all the pieces seem scattered, but once you start connecting them, the big picture makes more sense. Let’s start with what you do know and build from there.”

Connect to Real Life

“In the real world, we don’t always get step-by-step instructions—we have to figure things out and ask the right questions. This project is a chance to practice that skill in a safe space.”

Encourage Growth Mindset

“Remember when you learned how to ride a bike? It felt impossible at first, but you kept trying, and now you don’t even think about it. PBL works the same way—stick with it, and it will start to click!”

“This group work is unfair.”

Use structured roles and peer accountability.

Resources:

[Project Team Contract](#)
[Compass Points: Know Your Team](#)
[Group Work that Works](#)
[Crucial Conversations: Accountability](#)

Acknowledge Fairness Concerns

“I totally hear you—it’s frustrating when you feel like you’re doing more work than others. That’s why we’re using team contracts to set expectations. Let’s check in and make sure everyone is on the same page about responsibilities.”

“You’re right that teamwork isn’t always perfect. But learning how to communicate and solve those issues is just as important as the project itself. Let’s figure out how to fix it together.”

Connect to Future Success

“Every job and career involves working with different types of people—this is great practice for handling those challenges in a way that sets you up for success in the future.”

“In any team, some people step up as leaders. If you feel like you’re doing more, it might mean you’re naturally taking initiative—which is an awesome skill to build!”

Encourage Problem-Solving

“Instead of getting frustrated, let’s figure out a solution. What conversation could you have with your group to balance the work better?”

“This is way more work than a normal assignment.”

Break projects into manageable steps.

Resources:

[Project Management for PBL](#)
[Time Management Tips](#)
[Time Management Lesson Plan](#)

Validate Their Perspective

“Yep, I won’t lie—this is more work than a worksheet. But that’s because real learning happens when you dig deep, not when you just check off answers.”

“It does take more effort, but that’s because you’re creating something meaningful, not just memorizing for a test. Would you rather do a project that matters, or a bunch of worksheets?”

Focus on Small Wins

“Let’s break this into smaller steps. If we focus on one part at a time, it won’t feel so overwhelming.”

“You don’t have to finish everything at once. What’s one small step you can take today?”

Make it Feel Worth It

“Would you rather spend hours cramming for a test that you’ll forget next week or actually create something cool that you can be proud of?”

What gets in the way for Students?



“But how do I even know if I’m doing well on this?”

Use and train students how to use rubrics.

Resources:

[Setting Criteria Lesson \(Rubrics\)](#)

[PBL Works Rubrics](#)

[Self-Assess, Reflect Choice Board](#)

Acknowledge Uncertainty

“I get it—when there’s no ‘right answer,’ it can feel confusing. That’s why we use rubrics and feedback checkpoints to help you stay on track.”

“You might not know exactly what your final project will look like yet, and that’s okay! The best ideas often come together along the way.”

Focus on Growth, Not Perfection

“Instead of worrying about being ‘right,’ focus on making progress. What’s one thing you can improve today?”

Encourage Questions

“If you’re unsure, ask! I’m happy to give feedback along the way so you feel more confident.”

**“I don’t like speaking
in front of people and I
won’t do it.”**

Offer different formats for
presenting.

Resources:

[Public Speaking and Storytelling Tips](#)
[How to Engage Reluctant \(and Even
Refusing\) Presenters in PBL](#)
[How to Prepare Students for
Explaining Their Work in Public](#)
[Types of End Products](#)

Offer Alternatives

“I hear you—public speaking is nerve-
wracking for a lot of people. That’s why
we have different presentation options
so you can find one that works for you.”

“Would you feel more comfortable
recording a video, presenting in a small
group, or using visuals to help explain
your project?”

Build Confidence

“The best way to get better at speaking
is to practice in a low-pressure way.
Let’s do a quick run-through with just me
or a small group first.”

“Most people feel nervous about
presenting at first, but you’ll be so proud
of yourself once you do it!”

**“This doesn’t seem
relevant at all. I just
don’t care.”**

Make clear connections to
real-world issues and student
interest.

Resources:

[Community Engagement Plan](#)
[NTN: Spectrum of Authenticity](#)
[Interest Inventory](#)

Relate it to Their Interests

“What’s something you care about?
Let’s find a way to connect this project to
that!”

“I promise there’s a way to make this
interesting for you. What if you had the
freedom to focus on something you
enjoy within the project?”

Connect to the Real World

“Believe it or not, the skills you’re using
in this project—researching, problem-
solving, and presenting—are things
you’ll actually use in real life.”