



I'm Tired of Saying "We do PBL"

Dr. Robert Compton, Principal, Riverwalk Academy

Our school was founded with the goal of bringing a project-based learning (PBL) approach to the Rock Hill area. Sounds simple enough, right? Let me tell you, it's not. I joined the school in September 2017, and what I quickly discovered was that PBL was something that our teachers "did."

I'm sure you're wondering, "So what's the problem? Riverwalk Academy is supposed to do PBL, and you're telling me they do PBL. That sounds great!"

But that's the problem. PBL is not supposed to be something we do. PBL is supposed to be what we do.

Let me explain. Each summer, our team and [Buck Institute for Education PBL Works](#) provide three days of training. The teachers are excited and feel ready to start the year. They get to plan out their first project for when the students return. I often think to myself, "This is the year it's going to happen." Then, like annual clockwork, something mysterious occurs — everything that was just learned gets thrown out, and we end up building our school day to look something like this:

Monday-Thursday

7:45-8:05	Arrival/Morning work
8:10-8:55	Specials
9:00-9:50	Math Workshop
9:55-10:15	Readers Workshop
10:15-10:55	Guided Reading/Literacy Task
11:00-11:30	Recess
11:35-12:05	Lunch
12:10-12:35	Phonics
12:40-1:00	RTI/Interventions
1:05-1:40	Writer's Workshop
1:45-2:25	PBL/Research Workshop
2:30-2:35	Pack Up/Dismissal



Dr. Robert Compton is in his fifth year serving as the Head of School at Riverwalk Academy, a K–12 charter school located in Rock Hill, SC. He served as a special education teacher for students with intellectual disabilities and autism for eight years before moving into a district leadership role. He also served as a transformational coach for the SC Department of Education. He earned his B.S. and M.Ed degrees at Winthrop University and his Ph.D. from Northcentral University. His research focused on special education teacher retention and burnout.



Do you see how PBL is sandwiched between writer's workshop and dismissal? That's the problem. PBL shouldn't be something that is done for a finite amount of time or treated like a stand-alone core subject. Regardless of the training and support we've provided, the same thing happens across all grade levels; they revert to a traditional schedule and insert PBL into the mix of the different content areas that are covered. To the teachers' credit, when you look at their daily schedules, one will often see that either science or social studies is missing, and that's where they insert PBL. Regardless, PBL isn't supposed to be something we do as a stand-alone content area, nor is PBL simply a replacement for science or social studies.

After the second year of similar results, Riverwalk Academy joined the SC Department of Education's [Collective Leadership Initiative](#), a joint venture between the SC Department of Education and the [Center for Teaching Quality \(CTQ\)](#). We were quickly introduced to the collective leadership conditions matrix. The conditions matrix lists seven areas that need to be addressed when shifting to a collective effort to improve one's practices.

Collective leadership conditions matrix

Vision & strategy	Supportive administration	Capacity & resources	Work structures	Relationships & social norms	Shared influence	Orientation to improve	RESULTS
							IMPACT
							CONFUSION
							INACTION
							FRUSTRATION
							LACK OF SUSTAINABILITY
							FRICTION
							BURNOUT
							NO CHANGE

Inspired by the Managing Complex Change model

Our team had a shared vision and the support needed to make this pedagogical shift in our school day. We also had established our relationships and norms, shared influences, and identified needs for why we had to instill an orientation to improve.

While we thought we also provided the capacity, resources, and work structures needed for our teachers to sustain this PBL push, the results column of the conditions matrix revealed that this belief was nothing more than an espoused theory. Their frustrations and the lack of sustainability of our PBL shift was more than just growing pains. The conditions matrix hit the nail on the head.



We now had neon signs flashing in front of us that read “Capacity and Resources” and “Work Structures.” These two critical areas were preventing us from fully working through our original problem of practice: create school-wide and grade-level expectations for Project Based Learning, communicate those expectations to stakeholders, and maintain accountability at all levels.



These two signs were a game changer for Riverwalk Academy. We were no longer wondering why PBL wasn't working. We knew that we could transform frustrations into actual results by improving our capacity and providing our team with the resources they needed. Additionally, we recognized that we needed to improve our work structure in order to facilitate the sustainability of our PBL work. With a focus on improving capacity and ensuring resources were present along with a work structure to support the learning and growth of our teachers, we began seeing the shift in our classrooms from "doing" PBL to PBL is *what* we do.

One of the game changers that helped reduce teacher frustrations was that we moved from a professional development model that included multiday trainings during the teachers' first five days back and a midyear refresher, to one that included ongoing and weekly coaching and feedback from an outside consultant. We contracted with Dr. Dennis Dotter, a professor at Winthrop University. Dr. Dotter not only provided training to our staff, but he also came onsite several times a month to work directly with teachers in their classrooms. Through observations, coaching, and feedback cycles, teachers developed the courage and confidence to make the pedagogical shift from “doing PBL” to making PBL the instructional vehicle that would carry their students throughout the day.

To help with the sustainability of this project, we focused on one grade level at a time. We felt that by altering our work structures this way, we could slowly grow in-house experts. For example, instead of trying to provide mentoring and coaching from one person to 45 teachers, we focused only on our third-grade team. This focus lasted several months until the grade level successfully made the transition to 100 percent of their day being taught through PBL. Seeing this group successfully make this transition and sustaining it was exciting for everyone, and this excitement spread throughout the building like wildfire. Other grade levels wanted to experience this same success. The problem, however, was that there were 41 other teachers and only one Dr. Dotter. But guess what? We now have several additional coaches who can help support other teachers.

The road we took was not a straight shot, and there were times that we had to put the vehicle in reverse and start over. But one simple graphic, along with a lot of hard work, changed our trajectory. Our collective leadership journey kept us from doing the same thing over and over and expecting different outcomes. By improving our capacity and resources along with focusing on our work structures, our journey is turning into a success story. Our work is not done, but collectively, we're getting closer. Riverwalk Academy is now poised to be the place where PBL is what we do.

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