

48 Hours to Change the World

Co-written by Adam Haigler, Ben Pendarvis, and Ben Owens – all teachers at Tri-County Early College High School in Murphy, NC.

“What have you learned from this project?”

“I learned that I can change the world.”

That was the exchange between a visitor to our school and a student she was questioning as he and his team were putting the final touches on their “pitch.” The project, “48 Hours to Change the World,” was an idea originally spawned from a discussion the school’s teaching staff had as part of its weekly [Critical Friends](#) meetings. What began as brainstorming ways we could do a better job of emphasizing student mindfulness in our classes led to a three-day, school-wide project that allowed students to select a worldwide issue they cared about and develop a way to solve it. The results were astounding.

So how did it all work? As with any Project-Based Learning activity, we started with a high-energy entry event - in this case a team-building challenge that was meant to replicate the collaborative problem solving process. The students then spent time researching global issues on the [100 People](#) website and provided feedback through a Google Form survey that would ultimately identify the topic they would work on. Our staff analyzed real time results from the survey to group students into the single area they were most passionate about: food, shelter, energy, war, education, environment, water, health, or waste, and then directed them to a “home base” room. In their home-base groups, the students employed a brainstorming and team-formation protocol where they self-selected 4 to 6 team members that would work together over the next two and a half days to solve that problem. Staff members combined prior experiences with the Raleigh Startup Weekend EDU and a 48 Hour Film Project to frame the project storyboard.

One of the many cool things about this project was that rather than gravitating to where their friends were, the students selected teams based on shared solution ideas, meaning that most teams had a nice mix of freshmen through seniors! The role of the teaching staff throughout this process was to simply facilitate the process and help students refine their ideas into a “minimal viable product” (MVP) that could feasibly address the issue. To ensure that students had a choice in the matter and didn’t feel that this was a compulsory activity, we allowed students to choose between the group project or writing a 5-page research paper outlining a solution to a global issue. Unsurprisingly, not a single student chose the alternative track in this case.

In our fourth year as a “PBL school,” we had developed a significant level of experience and success with projects in each respective classroom, including a few co-taught, cross-curricular projects. What we had never attempted, however, was the daunting idea of a single project that would span the school’s grade-level and curricular areas. The staff agreed that rather than spending the time focusing purely on traditional academics, the three days before the Christmas break was a perfect time to test such an idea.

We wrapped up the project on the third day with each student team pitching their MVP to their peers in a strict 5-minute format. The top vote-getters from this round did a second pitch to members of the local community, who then selected the top three for the school. To emphasize the relevance of the

project, we promised to “sponsor” these top three projects from the school by pledging to help them implement their plans through assistance with grant proposals, seed funding, or award nominations that could make their vision a reality.

Anyone who has doubts about the capacity of this generation’s ability to develop innovative ways to tackle the world’s most pressing problems simply needed to listen to the ideas these students presented – from a social media site focused primarily on creating cross-cultural dialogue about warfare, to a PBL-based Life Skills course developed for high school students, to an app that cultivated awareness and funding for public health in the developing world by putting you in the shoes of a character who had to make life or death decisions. Even the ones that did not make the final round on the last day were impressive in their optimism to truly make a difference in the world. We certainly had overwhelming evidence that this comprehensive approach to school-wide projects was the next step in making the school’s PBL process even more powerful and impactful for students.

These three days of intense creativity and problem solving will be something these students will remember for years to come. After all, rather than traditional lessons or preparing for a test, these students were setting about to change the world. Isn’t that ultimately what we, as educators, should be preparing students to do?



Members of a student team making their final round MVP pitch to the student body and community judges.