

Building a Foundation:

How Technology-Rich Project-Based Learning Transformed Talladega County Schools April 2015



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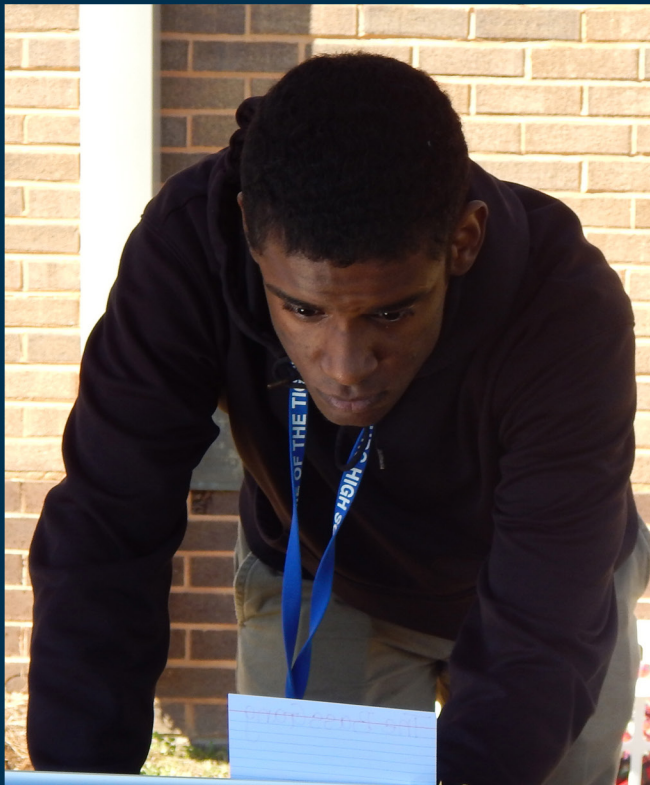


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Acknowledgements

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*The **Alliance for Excellent Education** is a Washington, DC-based national policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. www.all4ed.org*

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Introduction



▶ [Click here](#) to watch an overview of Talladega's story.

When students in Talladega County, Alabama, enter school, many find themselves completely immersed in a digital learning environment. Classrooms offer computers, interactive whiteboards, slates, and networked printers providing students access to the digital tools they need anytime they need them. Teachers, meanwhile, guide students as they solve real-world problems, using appropriate digital tools and software to teach core content standards and help students build vital twenty-first-century skills like communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking.

Today, Talladega County Schools's (Talladega's) students direct their own learning, empowered by the district's technology-rich project-based learning model. But that was not always the case.

A District with Challenges

Less than a decade ago, this small rural school district, located approximately fifty miles outside of Birmingham, faced a collection of challenges and struggled to serve its students, 35 percent of whom are African American and 1.6 percent are Hispanic.¹ Nearly 75 percent of Talladega's 7,746 students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, a common indicator of poverty.² The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that more than 30 percent of

TALLADEGA'S STRATEGIC GOALS

1. Increase student engagement through project-based learning.
2. Integrate technology tools to support instruction.
3. Train teachers to support this new way of teaching and learning.

Talladega's students lived below the poverty line in 2012 alone.³ Additionally, many students in Talladega have specific material needs or challenges, such as inadequate access to food or cold-weather clothing, which create additional learning barriers.

As recently as 2008, Talladega's test scores were dwindling and the high school graduation rate was "inconsistent and unacceptable," according to district administrators.⁴ Winterboro High School, specifically, ranked near the bottom with a graduation rate of only 63 percent.⁵ Countywide, students were disconnected from their schools and their learning, as demonstrated by the lack of participation in extracurricular activities, and the high number of discipline referrals, out-of-school student suspensions, and referrals to the district's alternative school.⁶ Teachers, meanwhile, were equally disengaged, with many leaving their schools each day promptly at dismissal time.⁷ Many teachers had become complacent with the delivery of instruction as well, explained Craig Bates, coordinator of instructional technology for Talladega County Schools and former principal at Winterboro High School.⁸

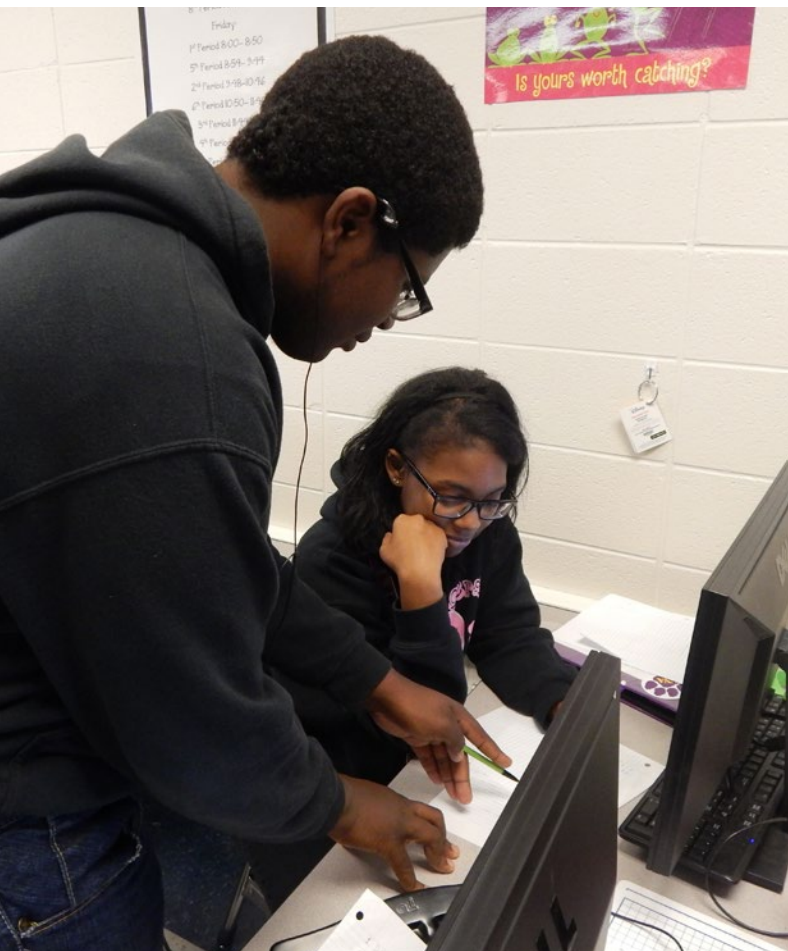
Doing the Research

When Talladega's school leaders contemplated the state of Winterboro High School and several other district schools, they realized the situation had to change. Between 2007 and 2008, a leadership team consisting of administrators and teachers from Winterboro High School, students, community members, and county business leaders visited model schools nationwide.⁹ The team targeted schools that leveraged technology to engage students, increase the rigor of student course work, improve student attendance, and focus on deeper learning and twenty-first-century skills like the four Cs—collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity.

"We looked at a variety of [instructional] methodologies to determine what would work best for us," said Vicky Ozment, Talladega's coordinator of instruction and personnel and a former Winterboro principal. "We really liked the technology [component] and how it enhanced learning at all of the schools [we visited], so we knew it had to be part of what we ended up doing."¹⁰

After completing the site visits, the leadership team decided to implement a project-based learning (PBL) model using a digital learning framework in the county's schools. PBL is a systematic teaching method that engages students in learning knowledge and skills through an extended inquiry process structured around complex authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks.¹¹ Incorporating PBL into the context of a digital learning environment elevates the authenticity of PBL further by allowing students to work with the same technological tools used in a variety of professional environments.¹²

During their site visits, Talladega's school leaders observed that the PBL model enables schools and teachers to create genuine learning experiences that empower students to solve complex problems through deep research and rigorous analysis. Furthermore, when schools align digital tools and technological infrastructure to student learning objectives, and introduce those tools into the PBL model, the technological and school culture changes cause pedagogical shifts that increase teacher and student accountability. Schools that operate with this new instructional model encourage students to personalize their learning by designing projects that align with their interests and academic goals, which in turn improves student achievement.



DEEPER LEARNING has become a short-hand way to describe teaching and learning that develops students' abilities to

- know and master core academic content;
- think critically and solve complex problems;
- work collaboratively;
- communicate effectively;
- self-direct and incorporate feedback; and
- develop the academic mindsets necessary for learning.

The **"Four Cs"** is an educational concept used by educators to describe four skill sets widely regarded as twenty-first-century skills: collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity.

Talladega's school leaders wanted their students to have that same rich learning environment. So they developed a plan to increase student engagement through PBL, integrate technology tools to support instruction, and train teachers in this new way of teaching and learning. The team identified four major skill areas necessary for students' success that became the core of Talladega's new PBL model:

1. core subjects and twenty-first-century themes;
2. learning and innovation skills;
3. life and career skills; and
4. information, media, and technology skills.

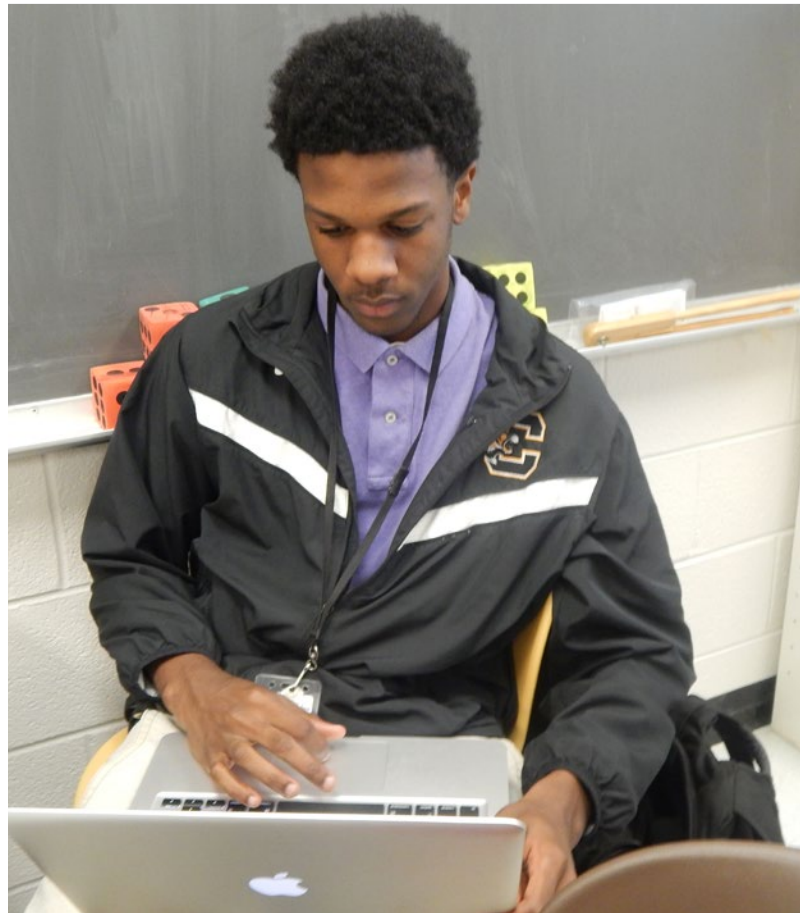
"Those were the [skill] areas where we noticed deficiencies and businesses were telling us that these were the skills that were missing from the workplace," Bates explained. "We were using a method of instruction that had been around for fifty years and we really needed something that would address the needs of today's students."¹³

In addition to adopting a new instructional strategy, Talladega altered the district's curriculum to implement new college- and career-readiness standards that emphasized student collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity.¹⁴

Beginning the Transition: Winterboro High School

▶ [Click here](#) to watch a video about Winterboro High School's transformation.

Talladega's leaders made a critical decision to start the district's transformation with one school: Winterboro High School. Originally, the district intended to demolish and rebuild the school. Upon further reflection, Talladega's leadership realized the building was not the problem. The real problem was the lack of instructional innovation, accountability, and leadership impeding student achievement at the school.¹⁵ Between 2007 and 2009, Winterboro's graduation rate dropped from 82 percent to 63 percent.¹⁶ Students exhibited little school pride, and extracurricular participation was low. Winterboro clearly needed some kind of intervention. Talladega's school leaders believed the school would benefit from the rigor, relevance, purposeful products, interdisciplinary teaching, state-of-the-art technology, and professional learning culture the PBL model offered.¹⁷



Students will strive to collaborate through oral, written, and digital communication in order to become critical thinkers with a strong work ethic. This will enable all students to be creative, community-minded leaders. —Winterboro High School student job description

▶ [Click here](#) to watch a video about teacher professional development in Talladega.

Talladega's success depended largely on providing teachers with extensive professional development to build their support for the district's vision for PBL. Talladega turned to the Buck Institute for Education (BIE) to conduct professional development for the teachers and the administrators at Winterboro in the summer of 2008.¹⁸ Bates, who became Winterboro's principal that same year, also received professional development through BIE to become the district's primary PBL facilitator and trainer for other school system staff members. During the summer of 2009, teachers districtwide received eight days of PBL training focused primarily on developing learning projects and using digital learning tools. The training exposed teachers to promising teaching practices they could incorporate into the new PBL approach, including active learning strategies, formative assessments, and other strategic teaching methods.¹⁹

In addition to the instructional changes, the district redesigned the facilities at Winterboro High School between March and August 2009 to support the PBL model. The redesign created four learning suites with movable walls and added 192 computers, group work stations, and a laptop lab. The district also provided students with mobile devices, such as tablets and interactive pens, to enhance their learning.²⁰

Involving Students in the Process

Throughout the transition, district and school administrators met with students to discover what changes students wanted at their school and involved them in the leadership team to ensure the reform efforts reflected students' desires. Student input was vital and ultimately influenced district leaders to select the PBL model.

To keep students involved with the implementation, Winterboro's administrative team created a student leadership team. This group of fifteen to twenty students worked collaboratively with school leaders to implement the PBL changes and build support among the larger student population.¹³ Members from the student leadership team attended summer staff meetings to help school leaders plan for School Year (SY) 2009–10. As a result of the summer meetings, Winterboro's students and staff members developed "student trust cards" to reinforce the atmosphere of professionalism the PBL model emphasizes. The cards serve partly as a behavior management system since students want to keep their trust cards to earn privileges associated with consistent good behavior. But the cards also symbolize the new expectations teachers have for students and the positive relationships and respect between the students and their teachers. In a March 2010 survey, 65 percent of Winterboro's students reported that the student trust cards impacted the school environment positively.²²

The student leadership team at Winterboro High School also worked with teachers and the broader student population to develop a student job description that outlines students' learning and behavior goals and provides professional and ethical guidance to direct students' daily activities.²³ This job description now serves as the school's mission statement.

▶ [Click here](#) to watch a video about the student response to PBL.

Building Community Support

As Winterboro High School adopted the new PBL model, the school's expectations for all students increased. Talladega's leadership team recognized the importance of implementing activities and lessons with real-world connections. So school district leaders expanded and deepened the district's relationship with the community to provide students additional opportunities to build their college- and career-readiness skills and also build critical community support for the new PBL model. Winterboro invited parents; community members; representatives from educational institutions, businesses, and nonprofit organizations; and staff members from the Alabama Department of Education and local and state work development offices to the school to observe the PBL model in action.

Winterboro High School's administration also organized open houses specifically for parents to build their support for the new instructional approach, inform them about the curriculum changes, and allow parents to talk with teachers and students about PBL strategy and the ways digital tools were permitting more ambitious and successful projects. "We told [parents] what was going to happen and how everything was going to be different," explained Bates. "We had a lot of one-on-one conversations with parents and in our community, there is a lot of trust. Now parents are the happiest."²⁴

Success at Winterboro

Within the PBL model, Winterboro High School's teachers provide students with opportunities to develop activities that engage and stimulate their learning. Students continuously create, practice, and explore as they complete in-depth projects that develop their deeper learning competencies—from analytical skills to media-awareness skills. Students blog, participate in online forums and chats, write and edit wikis, record podcasts and vodcasts, develop and deliver multi-media presentations, design and produce publications, and create complex animations. Winterboro High School's instructional model does not emphasize technology simply to accomplish the same types of tasks students previously pursued in a technology-poor environment; instead, the approach uses digital tools to support students as they create new projects and connect with their community.

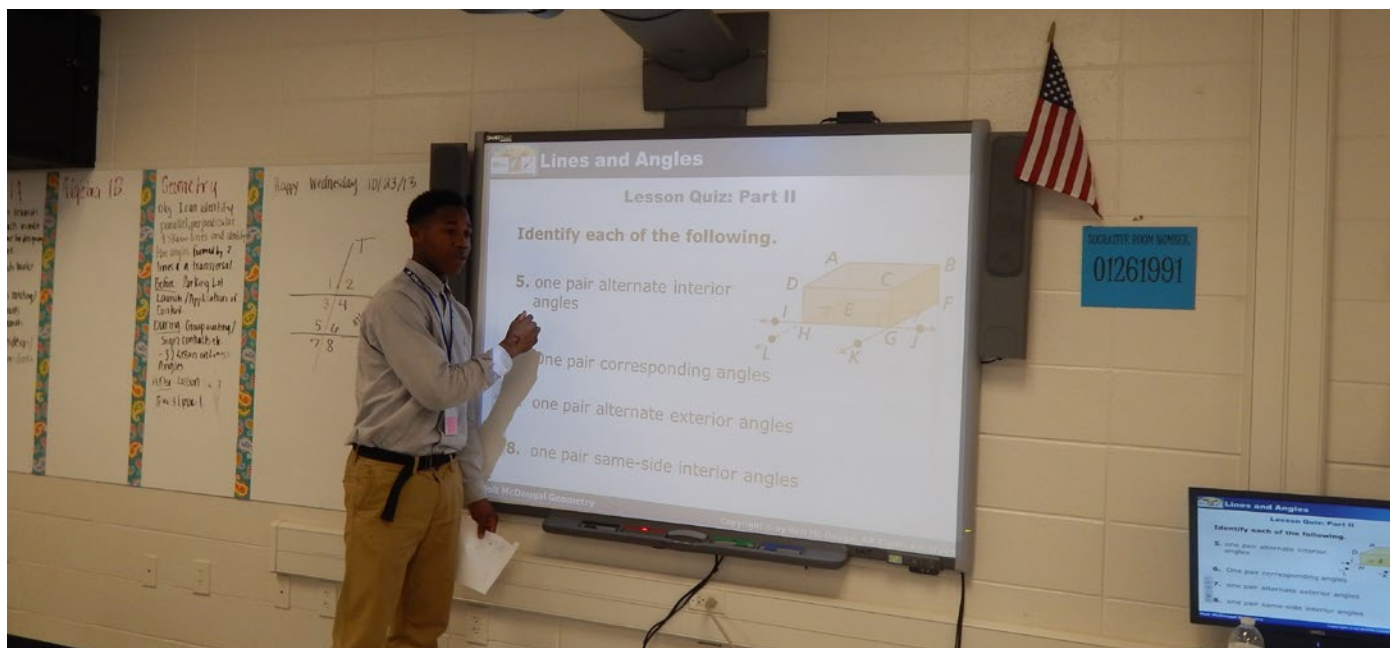
▶ [Click here](#) to watch a video about the ways Talladega's teachers use technology.



The demanding interdisciplinary nature of the PBL model has produced several local and state award-winning projects at Winterboro High School in recent years. For one such project, the junior classes of 2010, 2011, and 2012 created an elaborate 1920s museum complete with artifacts, content information, and interactive exhibits to illustrate this era in their history class. This project accompanied the students' reading of *The Great Gatsby* in their English courses. In a physical science course, meanwhile, students constructed rocket models while reading Homer Hickam, Jr.'s memoir *Rocket Boys*. For other projects, students designed and constructed scale models of environmentally sound housing units and built roller coasters designed to demonstrate mathematical principles visually.²⁵ These kinds of collaborative interdisciplinary projects demonstrate how Talladega's PBL model takes students beyond more traditional instructional methods.

▶ [Click here](#) to watch a video about the ways PBL prepares students for success in college and a career.

The effect on student engagement is notable. In a March 2010 survey, 76 percent of students said that PBL and the addition of technology made school more interesting, and 67 percent of students said their technology skills had improved greatly.²⁶ Additionally, Winterboro's student attendance increased to 96 percent in SY 2010–11, from a low of 92 percent in SY 2006–07.²⁷ Between 2009 and 2011, Winterboro's high school graduation rate also increased 24 percentage points, going from 63 percent to 87 percent, and reached 90 percent in 2014.²⁸ Winterboro's college acceptance rate increased as well, going from 33



percent in 2008 to 78 percent in 2012. During that same period, the number of out-of-school suspensions, alternative school referrals, in-school suspensions, and the mid-year dropout rate at Winterboro decreased significantly.²⁹

The PBL model improved more than student engagement at Winterboro High School, though. It improved teacher engagement as well. In 2007, Winterboro's administrators found it difficult to recruit and retain teachers. After the school implemented PBL, though, Winterboro's teacher attendance rate increased 50 percent between SYs 2008–09 and 2009–10. As student engagement increased, many teachers willingly opened their classrooms to students after school for tutoring and extra access to computers and project resources without receiving additional compensation.³⁰

"PBL forces a teacher to trust [her] students to learn, to own their learning," said Jennifer Barnett, a former lead teacher and digital learning specialist at Talladega's Childersburg High School. "Witnessing student growth, project after project, makes me want to give them more and more responsibility for their learning and their lives. ... They don't need to practice for the real world. They need to live in the real world now."³¹

A Re-imagined District: Implementing Project-Based Learning at Scale

Motivated by Winterboro High School's successes with PBL, the Talladega leadership team scaled up the model to bring the lessons of Winterboro to other schools in the district. In 2009, the district tapped Childersburg High School as the second site for reform and gave the school two years to implement PBL.

Childersburg faced many of the same issues that plagued Winterboro: low graduation rate, poor student attendance, lack of teacher and student enthusiasm, excessive disciplinary issues, and lackluster performance on standardized testing.³² As the school implemented the PBL model in 2011, school leaders focused on providing students with rigorous course work designed to "drastically improve a student's college and career readiness."³³ Teachers designed instruction to enhance students' skills in communication, creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking.³⁴ Students, meanwhile, provided valuable input during the transition by serving on interview panels for new employees. Not only did the students bring fresh perspectives to the hiring process, they also provided feedback about the qualities they desired in their classroom teachers.³⁵ "Allowing students input

▶ [Click here](#) to watch a video about how Talladega expanded PBL districtwide.

into the hiring process not only communicates the significance of student voice in this important decision, but allows the amazing insights and fresh perspectives of students to influence their own classroom experiences," said Barnett.³⁶

As Childersburg implemented the PBL approach, the new instructional method immediately impacted students' participation and engagement, just as it had at Winterboro. In one survey, 83 percent of Childersburg's students stated that they found the new curriculum more challenging than the curricula of previous years.³⁷ In 2012, one-third of Childersburg's incoming freshmen and sophomores enrolled in honors courses. During that same year, the school tripled the number of Advanced Placement (AP) courses available to students from two to six, and 17 percent of juniors and seniors enrolled in at least one AP course.³⁸ "At Childersburg High School, our students aren't studying leadership. They are *practicing* leadership by creating the school they want and need," Barnett explained.³⁹

The innovative new instructional approaches improved teacher engagement at Childersburg as well. During SY 2008–09, teacher attendance hit an all-time low of 85 percent, but attendance increased to more than 90 percent by SY 2011–12.⁴⁰ During the same time period, total disciplinary referrals decreased 32 percent, school suspensions decreased 41 percent, and major disciplinary referrals (for serious infractions such as fighting) decreased 50 percent. By SY 2012–13, the dropout rate had declined 86 percent compared to previous years, and student tardiness had declined 19 percent.⁴¹ Childersburg's graduation rate, meanwhile, increased from 73 percent in 2010 to 95 percent in 2014.⁴²

Like Winterboro, Childersburg focused on building community support for the school's changes and overcoming skepticism from parents and community members. School leaders invited parents and community members to observe model classrooms implementing PBL and established a task force to explain the various aspects of the school's transformation.⁴³ "At Childersburg, we had to gain the confidence of the community that the school was a safe place for their children to learn and that the school would provide a solid education that would truly prepare their children for a successful future," said Ozment. "We had to educate the community ... and let them explain to their friends and neighbors and churches what we were doing and why we were doing it."⁴⁴

Childersburg also developed new partnerships with community organizations including the Alabama School for the Deaf and Blind, the Childersburg Kiwanis Club, and the American Red Cross. Public librarians have served as judges for Childersburg's science presentations and have displayed winning projects in the public library downtown. City officials, local businesses, churches, and individuals in the community even supported Childersburg's first TigerFest, a community festival celebrating the beginning of the school year. Meanwhile, the Council for Leaders in Alabama Schools awarded Childersburg its prestigious CLAS Banner Award in 2012, which recognizes schools "with outstanding educational programs which serve as models for schools" throughout Alabama.⁴⁵

Districtwide Improvements

In 2012, on the heels of Winterboro's and Childersburg's successes, Talladega school leaders implemented the technology-rich PBL approach at three more schools and today, all seventeen county schools incorporate the instructional model in some form.⁴⁶ Additionally, the county allocated staff funding to place digital learning specialists in half of its schools to assist with their implementation of PBL and support teachers' use of technology, with the future goal of having these new staff positions in all schools.⁴⁷ The superintendent and school board also created a new central office position of coordinator of instructional technology, which Bates assumed in 2013, to provide districtwide technology and PBL training. The district offers planning and professional development sessions throughout the academic year to help teachers enhance their PBL instructional practices and bring teachers and instructional staff members together to refine existing projects and develop new ones.⁴⁸

During the summer of 2014, the school system launched its first "iLearn" institute, a three-day professional development event offered to all Talladega school staff members, free of charge. The event included classes taught by the district's digital learning specialists to inform teachers about new technology tools to support their instruction and provide PBL training to new staff members.⁴⁹

▶ [Click here](#) to watch a video about the technology support Talladega's teachers receive.

Throughout its evolution to a PBL school system, Talladega committed significant financial resources toward personnel, technology infrastructure to enable personalized learning, wireless and wired local area network access, and professional development. Admittedly, securing those financial resources has represented the largest obstacle to success, but the district has tapped funds from multiple sources including textbook budgets, capital improvement money, grants, and general fund dollars to create a highly successful program in a state where technology and professional development typically receive little to no state funding.⁵⁰

Since Talladega implemented the PBL approach seven years ago, student performance and engagement at the district's schools have improved significantly. Talladega's districtwide graduation rate is now 90 percent, a 10 percentage-point increase since 2011, and Winterboro High School alone boasts an impressive 27 percentage-point increase.⁵¹ Both Winterboro and Childersburg High Schools also have seen their number of disciplinary infractions decrease by more than 40 percent.⁵²



Keys to Success

▶ [Click here](#) to watch a video about how PBL has improved Talladega County Schools.

Much of Talladega's school system has transformed from a traditional instructional model to a twenty-first-century model designed to prepare students for college and a career. The district's leadership committed to providing students with relevant, real-world interdisciplinary projects that would prepare them for college, career, and life.

The successes of Talladega offer several promising practices and valuable lessons to help other districts seeking to create environments that foster deeper learning and use technology strategically to reach that goal.

- **Strengthen school culture.**

Shifting school culture was a critical aspect of Talladega's instructional redesign. Talladega's leaders nurtured a culture of professionalism throughout the district to support students' academic goals. This culture shift encouraged diverse groups of students to develop collaborative relationships and also met the needs of learners with varying skill levels and learning styles.⁵³

- **Invest in school infrastructure.**

Building the necessary infrastructure to support digital learning was central to Talladega's new PBL model and contributed significantly to the district's successes. Talladega focused on delivering full wired and wireless connectivity throughout its schools and implemented one-to-one digital device policies in schools like Winterboro and Childersburg High Schools to give students the tools and capacity to extend their learning time and to support the new PBL model. The district also acquired devices to enable students with special needs or learning difficulties to capitalize on the district's new digital focus and made tablets and other small manageable devices available for students who could not use school desktop computer stations to their fullest potential. At the same time, the district avoided the possible pitfalls of one-size-fits-all approaches by giving schools flexibility as they developed their infrastructure plans.⁵⁴



- **Invest in personnel and staff professional development.**

Talladega's PBL model provided a multi-faceted approach to learning that encouraged students to develop skills beyond what most schools typically require. Students personalized their learning to their individual interests and abilities. While this model gives students a degree of freedom and choice, it also engages them in rigorous projects that require deliberate planning, management, and execution from teachers. Consequently, the district provided teachers with appropriate training so they could adjust their instructional practices to encourage students to direct their own learning, while developing twenty-first-century skills.⁵⁵ Talladega encouraged teachers to experiment and access a wide variety of digital tools, providing the mentoring support necessary to implement digital learning in the classroom. The district even added new staff positions at the school and district levels to provide teachers with on-going support throughout the school year.

- **Partner with other school districts and community organizations.**

Talladega's visits to other model districts shaped the district's vision for its own reform. District leaders, like Bates, found that leaders from other school districts willingly shared their experiences and advice. Talladega's leadership also collaborated with local community groups to build support for the district's transformation and enrich students' learning by connecting lessons to real-world experiences.

- **Document the experience.**

Ozment said her one regret is that district leaders did not thoroughly document all parts of the district's transformation and she encourages other districts embarking on similar changes to do so. "We were busy and exhausted and no one had the strength or time to feel like we could document anything," Ozment said. "Anyone moving in this type of journey, if they had someone who could document the process, that would be a good idea."⁵⁶

- **Start planning as soon as possible.**

District leaders interested in implementing a technology-rich PBL instructional approach should create a vision for their school district and then put the appropriate school-level leadership in place to execute that vision.⁵⁷ Developing a comprehensive PBL and digital learning plan will take hard work, but district administrators should not let that dissuade them from undertaking a transformation similar to Talladega's. "Do not wait," said Ozment. "Get a group of smart individuals together, study some districts that have done this, develop your work plan and move. Get going. Time's wasting. ... The kids need it and the longer you wait, the farther you are getting behind."⁵⁸

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