

VAI Success Stories: Crossroads Charter Academy

26

Hours of
PD

10

Hours of
Projects

24

Teachers

250

Students

Crossroads Charter Academy and the Future of Professional Development

Crossroads Charter Academy (CCA)

Crossroads Charter Academy exists to cultivate a community of lifelong learners with courage, resolve, and strength of character. The school strives to teach how education can help students be a force for good, both as individuals and as members of their community. Unfortunately, busy schedules, testing pressures, and the weight of old habits can often get in the way. In order to make their mission a reality, Crossroads chose to partner with Van Andel Institute for Education (VAI), the makers of Blue Apple projects. By working together with VAI, Crossroads took the leap into a new kind of professional development.

The Challenges

Chief among Crossroads' goals was to work more intentionally toward Project-Based Learning instruction. In Project-Based Learning, or PBL, students integrate academic content into real-world learning experiences. Students come to understand that learning isn't just something you do for the next test — it has practical applications that can empower people to make a difference.

However, not every educator is familiar with Project-Based Learning. The process doesn't rely on tests or grades, but is, instead, built around student experience. Complicating matters was the sudden arrival of COVID-19, which forced many schools to adopt a remote-learning model. To better achieve the desired results, teachers at Crossroads would need to meet both challenges head-on.



Creating classrooms where curiosity,
creativity, and critical thinking thrive.

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Rising to the Occasion

The first step was for teachers at Crossroads to receive professional development in PBL and how it made learning memorable, meaningful, and fun. They discovered how to connect their projects to rigorous content standards, how to create space for student choice, and how to differentiate PBL work for individual learners.

To help them get started, teachers also received Blue Apple projects. These PBL units included all the resources and lesson plans that they'd need to give students a great PBL experience, and helped teachers implement PBL successfully right away, while modeling what a successful PBL project includes so that they could develop their own projects in the future. Teachers were supported along the way by Ben Talsma, one of VAI's project coaches, who guided them to customize their projects to suit their unique classroom needs.

When the pandemic closed in-person learning, Crossroads' teachers worked with Ben remotely to continue to develop their professional expertise. In doing so, they could hit the ground running when face-to-face learning was back in session.

Spreading the Word

Despite the difficulties caused by the COVID pandemic, every teacher at CCA was able to implement two PBL projects with their students during the 2020-2021 school year. It was a decision that revolutionized their school.

After teaching Blue Apple projects, Crossroads teachers understood how PBL could be implemented effectively in their classrooms. They were more prepared to develop their own projects built around the interests and aptitudes of their students. For the next school year, each teacher has created four rich, long-term projects that they're passionate about teaching. Clearly, the future is bright.

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Spreading the Word, continued.

Project-Based Learning is also helping Crossroads get the word out about the great work that they're doing. With weekly social media posts and frequent student presentations regarding the public products they've created, the school is really making a name for itself in the community.

By supporting teachers with training, resources, and ongoing assistance, Van Andel Institute for Education has helped Crossroads Charter Academy ensure that their move toward PBL would help their school be a beacon of great education in their area.

Hear What They Had to Say!

"It's really helping people recognize what we're all about. And of course, the students love seeing themselves and their work out there in the broader world. Project-Based Learning has really helped our school get out into the community — to have an impact and to share who we really are. It's just what we needed."

— Doni Schumaker,
Elementary Principal at
Crossroads Charter Academy

"Project Based Learning has been such a wonderful part of my teaching experience this year! Being a first-year teacher, I honestly don't know how I could teach any other way."

— Grace Kelley,
4th Grade Teacher,
Crossroads Charter Academy

"Crossroads is proof of what can happen when an incredible staff gets the practical support and resources they need. They've tackled an incredible challenge this year, and it has been deeply gratifying to see them create so many learning experiences that are memorable, meaningful, and fun. CCA is a perfect example of what the Van Andel Institute believes education can be: a place where curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking thrive!"

— Ben Talsma,
Learning Solution Specialist,
Van Andel Institute for Education



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