



CHALLENGING OURSELVES to CHALLENGE OUR STUDENTS

Authentic, challenge-based learning has positive effects not only academically, but in many other important areas as well.



In the Spring of 2011, we were blown away by Elaine Wrenn, Director of Technology at Echo Horizon School (EHS), who presented on Challenge-Based Learning (CBL) at Windward School's Science Active Learning Colloquium. ([Science Active Learning Colloquium](#)) The crux of CBL is that student groups identify issues or problems within their community through research and investigation, and then set out to develop solutions, implement them, document the progress, and then reflect on the impact of the solution. (For a more com-



plete description of the EHS project and the CBL process, see the CAIS [Faculty Newsletter Spring 2012](#) issue). We were inspired by the creativity and level of community engagement of the projects designed by students. We knew it had to happen at Windward; we just weren't sure how.

We began assembling and meeting our team of collaborative educators in order to develop our Big Idea, Essential Question, and Challenge. To address the human body and digestion curricular piece of seventh grade life science, as well as health from human, community, and environmental perspectives, we knew our Big Idea was going to be about *food*.

We met once or twice a month from August to October, and then weekly, to plan out the scope and sequence of the project, the kind of support we would need, and how we were going to structure class periods. We drew mainly from the Challenge-Based Learning materials and research papers on the [Apple website](#) and [ChallengeBasedLearning.org](#), but also incorporated elements from other models, such as the [Green Ambassadors Teachers Institute](#) at [Environmental Charter High School](#).

Our biggest challenge was that we knew we wanted to create a supportive structure for students to succeed, but had no idea what they were going to come up with! We met with students at Windward who had attended Echo Horizon for elementary school, and got their feedback on what worked about their CBL project on water, and what they would change.

As our challenge to the Windward students we made a [video](#) highlighting some important ways food affects our daily lives, which we showed to students on the first day of the unit. We challenged our seventh graders to improve the health of their community through food, and they did!

Students brainstormed ideas around food, and were placed into groups based on their first or second choice of topics. Together,

they wrote up guiding questions for their topics on a class wiki, and worked with our research librarians at the Center for Teaching and Learning to hone their research skills, and to learn how to develop surveys and interview questions.

Student groups hosted an organic day at our campus kitchen; made a Museum of Fast Food display for the campus to look at the nutrition facts of different fast foods vs. healthier options; planned a local foods scavenger hunt at the Mar Vista farmer's market; delivered lunches to homeless people in Santa Monica; raised money and awareness for CHOSA, an organization which helps provide food for children in South Africa (www.chosa.org/); drafted a bill and spoke with members of the state assembly and lobby groups to improve the clarity of labeling on chicken that has been injected with high-sodium solutions, also known as plumping - among many other projects!



Throughout the project, students gained valuable academic skills such as: identifying and using a variety of reliable sources, conducting interviews and surveys, writing emails and generating meaningful questions to ask experts. They collaborated and reported on their research using GoogleDocs and GoogleSlides, and created blogs and websites, as well as



presenting their work to an audience, and participating in constructive self-assessment and reflection. You can see students speak for themselves on what they learned on the [Food Challenge Google Site](#). Students presented their research and solutions to other students, local community groups, faculty, parents, and administrators at a seventh grade Food Challenge Community Forum held on campus. Their work was nothing short of amazing.

This year, we have begun planning for a Water Challenge. There are many relevant and engaging resources for addressing water quality and consumption both in Los Angeles, and globally; and we have made many connections to local community partners and experts for delving deeper into experiential and service learning. Our goal is to keep it local, as a focus on Los Angeles water issues can be a lens for addressing water access and quality around the world.



A few of us attended Cathy Berger Kaye's most recent Water Planet Challenge workshop, [Out the Spout & Down the Drain](#), with resources and activities from [Going Blue: A Teen Guide to Saving Our Oceans, Lakes, Rivers, & Wetlands](#), a teen action guide she wrote with Philippe Cousteau and EarthEcho International. ([Make a Splash](#), for elementary students, is coming soon.) The energy for this year's water challenge is palpable.

Projects that engage youth in taking action in their communities have proven to affect students positively in areas such as academic performance, as well as in character development, and personal empowerment. Responsibility and investment in social change, leads to lifelong civic engagement.

We have all heard of "21st century skills" by now - employers are demanding a workforce equipped with the 4 C's: creativity, critical thinking,

SAMANTHA LYON

Service-Learning Consultant

GERALDINE LOVELESS

Seventh and Eighth Grade Science Teacher

Windward School

samm.lyon@gmail.com

gloveless@windwardschool.org



communication, and collaboration. These are the very same skills that will be needed to address global problems of climate change, war, financial instability, poverty and hunger.

Challenging students to take action shows them you trust in their ability to make change in the world. More than 95% of students in the Challenge-Based Learning pilot study self-reported that they were deeply engaged, routinely worked in groups, and used the web and digital media to richly communicate their solutions (New Media Consortium, <http://www.nmc.org>).

In our planning process last year, we quickly found that simply overlaying the "CBL Framework" onto our school's class schedule, timing, number of groups, spring break, midterms, and technology expertise was a bit like putting a square peg into a round hole, or rather a hole with many nooks and crannies and amoeba-like edges. We were excited to push the boundaries of our students' classroom experiences as well as to the curriculum model itself.

We joined with other educators at The Willows Community School, Center for Early Education, Sequoyah School and Echo Horizon School to keep refining the model as it makes sense for each campus as well as to develop CBL best practices, and to share local resources. We want to continue to push ourselves to be even better at creating a structure for students to be successful, and then step back, as much as we can, to improve the model even more. The project challenged us as educators to work collaboratively as we deepened the seventh grade life science course to incorporate service-learning, research and media skills-building learning experiences for our students.

What is our role as adults and educators in providing meaningful experiences and real-world skill-building for our students? How can we best support youth-driven leadership and meaningful community engagement through action and service-learning? Barbara Cervone, founder and president of *What Kids Can Do*, <http://www.whatkidscando.org/> wrote in 2002:

"More than twenty-five years ago, the National Commission on Resources for Youth argued that youth can contribute meaningfully to their communities and, in the process, to their own development. 'What they cannot do on their own,' the commission concluded, 'is create the climate and the conditions that will permit them to take these participatory roles in society on a widespread scale. That is the challenge and the task of the adult world.' " (p. 83)

Fellow educators - we challenge you to push yourselves to take risks and to ask your students be the leaders not of tomorrow, but of today.