

Innovative ways to teach. Innovative ways to learn.

BY JOHN SULLIVAN, HEAD OF LOWER SCHOOL

As I walk around the building on an almost daily basis, it is exciting to watch Lower School students at Allendale Columbia working individually or in small groups at a level of engagement that reflects purpose and enthusiasm. It is also very apparent to me that our classroom teachers have fully invested in Project-Based Learning (PBL).

Project-Based Learning is an educational model that gives students a purpose for learning. The Driving Question creates the first path to a destination or outcome. The journey that begins with The Driving Question can often take on pauses, detours, and winding roads that provide foundational skills that students need to learn in order to arrive at the final destination.

Parents occasionally ask how and when foundational skills are taught when a curriculum is designed around PBL, and this is where relevance sparks incredible curiosity. Some foundational skills are planned in advance and evaluated for the level of mastery that students need to successfully complete the PBL. For example, consider the driving question, "How does the average temperature of this past September in Rochester compare to the five previous Septembers?" Direct foundational instruction may be planned in advance around research skills, finding averages, rounding, designing graphs, etc., so that students can effectively respond to the driving question.

The need to teach some foundational skills can also emerge as PBL takes a direction that may not have been originally considered. An example of this might be the need to teach the parts of a business letter to a small group of students who want to effectively communicate with the CEO of a company.



Drawing of Mr. Sullivan by Owen Palomaki '24.

At AC, we recognize that it should never be assumed that every child in the class needs the same level of instruction of a foundational skill. In Lower School, differentiation is critically important because it is the key to allowing each child to move forward or go more in-depth with a skill; thus, differentiation is, by its nature, varied when done well.

While some schools are heavily restricted by Common Core standards and scheduling, in Lower School at AC, all instruction can be done in PBL time whether students are working independently on projects or learning a foundational skill that will successfully propel them forward. It is clear that students retain information better once they apply it, and the application of a foundational skill becomes real when it is put into practice within the context of PBL.

As a faculty, we are modeling collaborative teaching and learning by creating a resource list of students, faculty and staff, parents, and community members who can act as experts for our students. One teacher alone cannot create a PBL environment that provides fluidity of movement, flexibility

of goals, and a definitive solution to every unforeseen obstacle. It takes collaboration and communication between many people to make this model of education work most effectively. It takes an acceptance that the PBL model is not a pretty little package that we impose on our students; instead, it's a dynamic, messy process that engages children in their own learning and equips them with skills to thrive in the unscripted world ahead of them.