

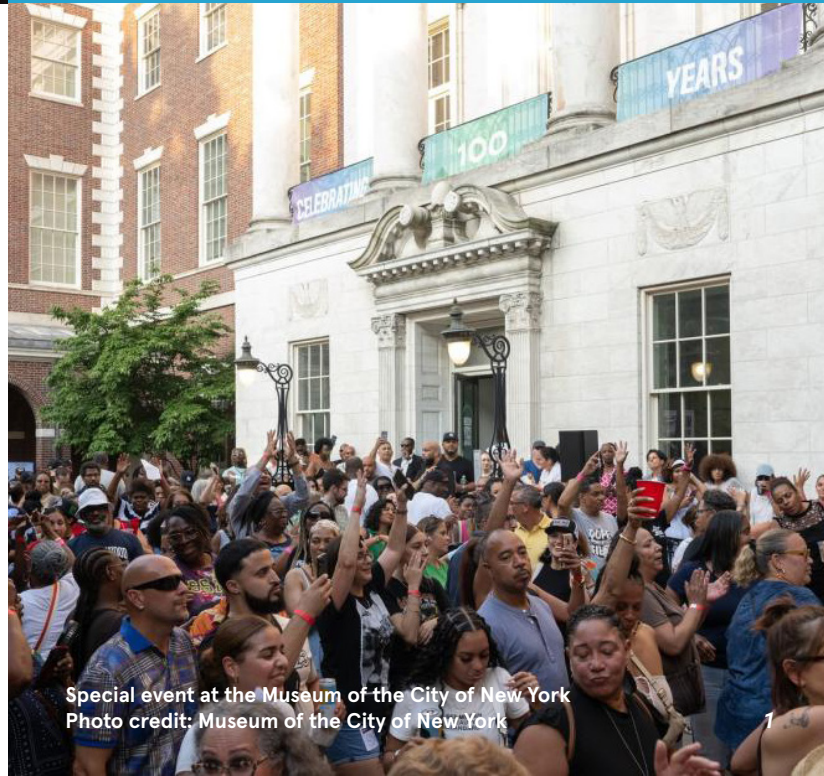
All Learners All the Time: Project-Based Learning and Equity in the Internationals Network



Students from Pan American International High School at Elmhurst
Photo credit: PAIHS Teatro Instagram

Students from Pan American International High School in Queens bustle across the stage of Repertorio Español for their second standing ovation, basking in the applause after performing a full-length English-language production that they wrote themselves. Only a few short months earlier, they were studying character development and exploring narrative structures, and now they had taken the stage as an ensemble in a real professional theater before an audience of parents, teachers, and the general public.

Teachers and students from every borough pour into the Museum of the City of New York for “The Day of Change,” a project a student group constructed with their teachers. Some of the young creators usher guests into an auditorium to engage in student-led community-building activities focused on the individual’s capacity to influence change, while others rehearse talking points for guided tours they crafted for the museum’s exhibits on activism. Still other students ready presentations on the research they conducted on real-life activities. And the guests get to enjoy an interactive theatrical presentation the students created, drawing on interviews and surveys they conducted months prior. So many moving pieces, all student-run and all working in concert.



Special event at the Museum of the City of New York
Photo credit: Museum of the City of New York

After a presentation about their language and personal histories, trios of students lead small groups of community members out into the neighborhoods around their school, guiding them through experiences with food, religious centers, community-based organizations, and local landmarks to get a deeper glimpse into the worlds these young people inhabit outside of the classroom. These same students arrived in the country just a short time ago, and now they are orienting educators to experiences that will help students be more confident in the classroom.



Participants in a community walk from Oakland International High School.
All photos: Oakland IHS



Student from International High School at Prospect Heights shaking hands with a customer.
All photos: IHS Prospect Heights

Students call out to customers at their pop-up store in a repurposed bakery, pitching the uniqueness of their wares: “chocolate scented, coffee-infused.” An outdoor seating area, initially created for a wary public during the social distancing of 2020, now hosts a buzzing crew of students, each of whom has created a collection of homemade candles, soaps, or decorations. The event is the culmination of one class’s investigation into entrepreneurship, and they are getting a taste of what it’s like to conceive of, market, and sell a product right at home in their own community – an experience that will later serve as a rich foundation for reflection, analysis, and writing.





Students and teacher from International High School at Prospect Heights
Photo credit: Cora Kobischka

What Is Project-Based Learning?

Project-based learning, which places hands-on experience at the core of instruction, is not new. Some scholars date it back to ancient Rome and medieval Paris (Craig & Marshall, 2019) or to the origins of vocational education (Knoll, 1997). In the U.S., Dewey (1938) emphasized the foundational importance of experience in education, advocating for the creation of interactive, historical, and dynamic yet structured learning opportunities as an effective means for students to acquire knowledge that applies outside of the classroom. The Italian educator Maria Montessori and the Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget both significantly influenced educational approaches that incorporate hands-on, problem-based, active learning.

At its core, project-based learning (PBL) involves tangible experiences in context. Essentially, participants engage in open-ended problem-solving to create products or work samples – complicated tasks that require significant skills and demonstrate that students have acquired them.

Such projects might include investigating local water quality and writing letters to municipal representatives about the findings; analyzing the representation – and gaps in representation – in local monuments and public spaces, and then curating an exhibit that lifts up underrepresented histories; creating an additional scene for a famous play and running roundtables on how the new material reframes the original's underlying themes; or working with a local business to model its delivery infrastructure and optimize designs for packaging.

As the area of experiential education has evolved, recent years have brought a resurgence in enthusiasm for the hands-on approach. Project-based

learning has been lauded as extremely effective in promoting 21st century skills (Bell, 2021), including critical thinking, problem-solving, and immersive experiences with real audiences (DeVivo, 2021; Handriato & Rahman). PBL is central in the design of innovative public schools, including Outward Bound Schools, Big Picture Learning, and schools across the New Tech Network.

PBL is also used in some of the most elite schools in the U.S. including Phillips Exeter Academy, the prestigious Sidwell Friends in Washington D.C., and Avenues, which also has campuses in cities around the world. PBL has been recognized as a key component in the esteemed International Baccalaureate. These institutions seek to provide immersive, hands-on learning experiences through project-based curricula and coursework to promote critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, as well as relevance and the application of knowledge to the real world, often referred to as “authenticity.”

At the same time, this research-based, time-tested approach has been shown to be of great benefit to multilingual learners (MLLs) as a powerful driver of educational equity (Lucas Education, 2021). In this learning brief, we will explore the foundational principles and elements of project-based learning and make a case for its importance in the education of MLLs and recently arrived immigrant and refugee adolescents (newcomers). In addition, in this and the subsequent briefs in this series, we will seek to answer the question:

What does it mean to implement project-based learning (PBL) with adolescents who must adjust to U.S. schools as they learn English?



Project-based learning is a central organizing principle of Internationals Network schools.

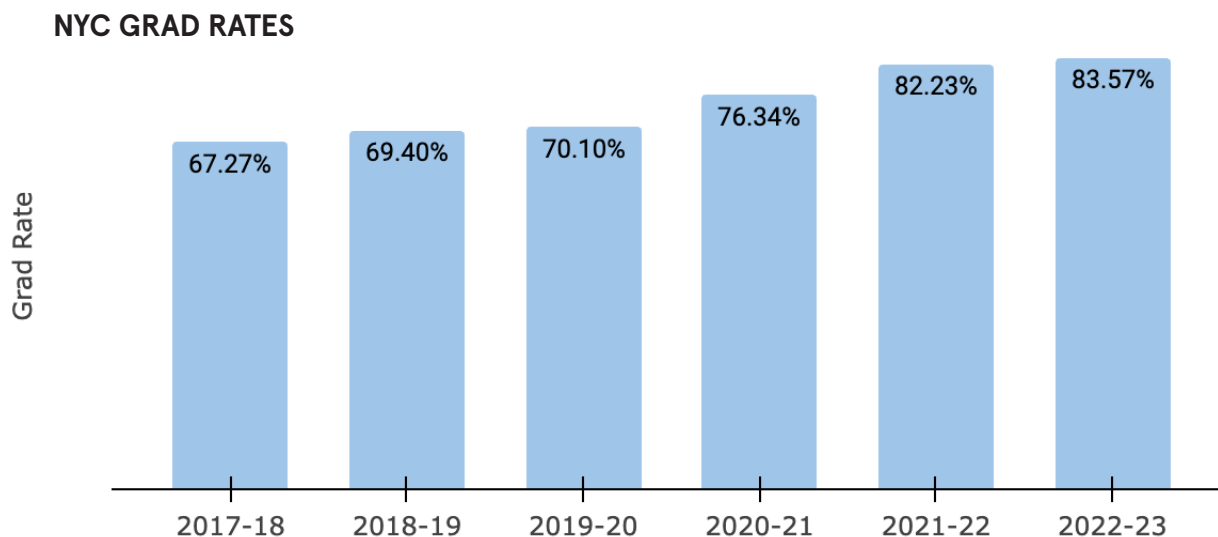


What Is Internationals Network?

Since our inception, Internationals Network for Public Schools has designed, developed, and sustained public, district-run middle and high schools and school-based programs for adolescent newcomers. Project-based learning is one of the central organizing principles of Internationals Network schools, and our results (see box below) are a testament to the method's success. Our track record with PBL starts nearly 40 years ago, when teachers seized the opportunity to design an entire school to address the needs of newcomers who were ill-served by the teacher-centered approaches in place at most traditional high schools. Today, Internationals Network schools enroll about 9,000 students across the U.S. representing the gamut of academic experience, from those fully prepared to those with emergent literacy. Outcomes at our schools demonstrate that programming projects is an effective way to ensure that students progress toward graduation and, when they complete high school, are prepared to chart their own path.

In every district where Internationals Network collects data, our students outperform their peers.

For students in New York City Internationals Network schools, graduation rates have risen over time.



Year by year, a higher proportion of multilingual learners graduate Internationals Network high schools than their peers in multiple districts across the U.S. by an average edge of 4 percentage points. And far more Internationals Network graduates enroll in college than their peers, by an average of more than 12 percentage points. Internationals Network graduates also remain enrolled and complete their secondary education at rates well above peers from similar low-income, high-minority schools.

In 2023, 88% of Internationals Network high school students graduated on time in New York City¹. In Maryland, the rate reached 70% at the International High School at Langley Park and 81% at the International High School at Largo. Consistently over the past decade, more than 70% of Internationals Network's N.Y.C. alumni have enrolled in college within the first year after graduating, a rate more than twice that of their low-income peers attending urban schools.

¹ To graduate, students in New York City Internationals School are required to complete projects in each subject area, as well as pass English and Math Regents exams.

Why PBL Is Effective for Multilingual Learners: Equity and Access

Project-based learning is effective for all students, including multilingual learners.

Teachers of MLLs and newcomers are familiar with their students being last in line for novel programs to stimulate learning, including advanced coursework, arts education, and project-based approaches. The rationale has often been that students perceived to have “skills gaps” have to reach a certain level of academic, linguistic, or technical proficiency before they can engage in instruction perceived as enriching or innovative. However, The New Teacher Project demonstrated in its report “The Opportunity Myth” (2018) that students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and English language learners were less likely than others to experience approaches that were deeply engaging, asked enough of them, and developed student ownership of learning. It is worth noting that many MLLs are in schools that are under immense pressure to demonstrate student growth on state academic exams. However, focusing on getting students to pass leads many educators to “teach to the test.”

However, the “remediation before innovation” mindset belies the reality revealed by research. Studies have consistently shown that rigorous project-based learning has a powerful effect on student achievement across all racial and soci-economic groups. There are actually many ways to respond to performance gaps on standardized tests, and a well-developed project-based curriculum has been demonstrated to prepare students for standardized exams more successfully than the traditional approach of focusing on basic content. For instance, a recent study (Lucas Education Research, 2021) found that “Embedding project-based learning in Advanced Placement courses increased the probability of students earning a passing score on AP tests by about 8 percentage points in the first year and 10 percentage points after teachers had two years of experience with the project-based curriculum” (Saavedra, Liu, et al., 2021). In fact, project-based approaches serve a multiplicity of purposes: addressing remedial needs, promoting engagement, challenging students at their level, and fostering the kind of learning that leads to higher academic performance.

The cooperative nature of PBL also supports the development of oral language skills. We know that oral language provides a bridge to written language and full literacy, and MLLs need multiple opportunities to practice and rehearse newly acquired language in order to understand high-level content. A well-planned project-based curriculum provides the language structure and support that such students need to solve problems, answer complex questions, and apply new knowledge to the real world. Project-based learning is also the most efficient way to support them in building the 21st century skills they need beyond high school, to succeed in college and their careers. Regardless of English proficiency, all MLLs engaged in projects are strengthening their critical thinking and building problem-solving skills alongside collaboration and self-direction. These skills reinforce the content knowledge and language skills they are simultaneously developing.

The Buck Institute for Education’s initiative [PBLWorks](#) offers the clearest set of criteria for a strong project-based unit in any content area in its “[Gold Standard PBL: Essential Project Design Elements](#)” primer.

These elements include:

- 1) building projects around an open-ended question or puzzle that leaves room for interpretation,
- 2) allowing ample time for students to investigate and follow the threads they uncover;
- 3) focusing on activities and topics that are relevant to young people and their communities, and that offer engagement with the type of work that professionals in the field do routinely,
- 4) creating opportunities for students to make meaningful decisions about how they will engage with learning and eventually demonstrate their understanding,
- 5) offering guidance and practice for students to think about what they are learning,
- 6) including many opportunities for targeted feedback and ample room for students to revise and update their work throughout the project, and
- 7) channeling ways for students to share their work with a larger community.

These elements work together to support key learning goals: content knowledge, understanding, collaboration and project management. While different organizations may offer varying conceptions and iterations of similar design elements, one idea remains true across different iterations of PBL: It is not something tacked on after a long bout of traditional classroom instruction. Rather, PBL works best as the primary method for students to interact with, construct and absorb new knowledge and abilities.

The following graphic shows how discrete practices widely recognized as effective for newcomer MLLs can be brought together in a cohesive whole to meet the needs of newcomer multilingual learners. These research-based instructional elements, similar to those found in resources shared by organizations including [Center for Applied Linguistics](#), WestEd’s [Quality Teaching for English Learners](#), and the [WIDA Consortium](#) are key to supporting MLLs’ educational success. PBL enables teachers to integrate effective instructional practices in support of rigorous content-based language-rich coursework for diverse groups of learners. When we consider how many challenges students face in terms of language and content, projects may seem intimidating at first. However, from a teaching and learning perspective, they are in fact an easier path to ensuring multilingual learners have access to rich content and are able to develop their language and achieve equitable outcomes.

The Components of PBL Enable Teachers to Integrate Effective Instructional Practices for Multilingual Learners

Elements of Effective Instructional Practice	Components of PBL That Support the Corresponding Instructional Practice
Community-building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term & immersive • Responsive to students' interests, skills, & ambitions • Space for rehearsal & risk-taking • Collaborative investigation of meaningful topics over time • Build social connections among MLLs, with school & the larger community • Establish a celebratory, affirming platform reflecting students & their work
Language & Content Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purposeful, language-rich, experiential, & interdisciplinary • Space for students to practice & rehearse new language • Cycling of content, skills, & language • Opportunities for students to use, rehearse, & apply language via meaningful content • In-depth exploration that supports language development
Collaboration & Peer Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative investigation of topics • Meaning-making through discussion, investigation, debate, & reflection • Sustained inquiry • Constructive critique • Collaborative, public-facing products
Use of Home Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple languages provide access to new ideas & content • Home language(s) as tools in projects • Materials & resources in students' home languages & English
Hands-on Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication of concepts & ideas through experiences, not text • Student input, interactivity, & exploration bolster cognitive readiness for new language • Creation of a tangible project • Intentional engagement with a community • Scaffolds for student input, choice, & meaning making
Culturally Responsive Material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topics, issues, & concepts relevant to students & their communities • Students' lived experiences & interests as foundational • Leveraging of diversity within classroom, school & community • Student-initiated problem-solving in authentic contexts
Age-appropriate Content & Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical thinking • Problem solving skills • Collaboration • Self-directed learning
Emphasis on Heterogeneity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration of range of student knowledge, talents & interests • Varied pacing toward a shared endpoint • Engagement with communities with distinct backgrounds, identities, histories, & needs • Multiple access points • Multimodal, multimedia, multilingual & multilevel resources

For more detail on these elements, [click here](#).

While many educators are aware of the benefits of PBL, a common misconception persists: that emergent English speakers cannot engage in project-based learning until they have the requisite language and academic skills to do higher level work. Teachers may find themselves asking, “How am I going to get my students to do this? Don’t they need higher English proficiency to meaningfully engage with a project of this nature?” This series of learning briefings offers reassurance that the structure of project-based learning actually lends itself to **more** opportunities for multilingual learners to rehearse and internalize both language and complex content skills. Planning project-based units allows the teacher multiple opportunities to integrate language instruction with the skills and knowledge necessary to master an academic subject area, and the project itself provides an engaging opportunity for students to acquire and employ the language of the discipline they are studying.

“Multilingual students are successful when instruction shifts from assigning tasks to meticulously teaching learning objectives. Since PBL is learning that happens over several phases, each phase builds on the next, and this type of intentional planning and clear teaching of each phase creates the conditions for MLs to be successful. When PBL is planned and instructed in this way, all multilingual students, regardless of their English proficiency, will be able to engage in this authentic form of learning.” (Huynh, 2023)

The latest research on project-based learning reveals that multilingual learners stand to benefit a great deal from participating in carefully designed, well-scaffolded PBL – and that without it, they are robbed of opportunities to develop and refine their English in real contexts, with real problem-solving, for an audience that includes their community, families and the general public.

Conclusions

We know that project-based learning not only provides students with rich experiences beyond the classroom, but it also offers an entry point into texts and engages students in ideas and learning, from which language and content understanding emerges. Research affirms these benefits, but there has been less documentation of what PBL looks like in practice, especially for adolescent MLLs. Internationals has built an entire network premised on engaging these students with PBL. Project-based learning is one of the Core Principles of our approach, and we have found that when school structures support its implementation, the impact is expanded and maximized. PBL is not just a good way to teach English and promote language development; it is the **best** way to provide access to content, promote learning, build community, and

integrate students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Our focus on PBL has enabled Internationals Network to cultivate a community of educators who are collaborative, equity-driven, and committed to transforming the educational experience of multilingual learners and school communities. Internationals Network is unique in promoting PBL: through practitioner-vetted examples emerging from schools’ real projects that teachers have implemented for MLLs in every subject area.

Presenting their own original full-length theatrical works to elected officials; leading community members in interactive discussions about issues of great import to them; becoming entrepreneurs who bring their original products to the local economy; mapping the physical and cultural contours of their communities to improve educational conditions in their own schools – these examples of our learning projects are vivid and vibrant.

However, it is clear that successful projects are generally not simple to set up. If you are considering using PBL in your own classroom, Internationals Network acknowledges that instituting PBL can present challenges, and that, for some educators, doing so can initially feel out of reach.

In this series of learning briefs, Internationals Network will illuminate exactly how PBL can work for you, detailing how actual schools, real teachers, and real students have generated, produced, refined, and implemented PBL for heterogeneous, multilingual classrooms. And we will further dispel some of the myths associated with the deficit-based view that PBL only works for some students, arguing for an assets-based approach that ensures MLLs have access to novel and rigorous forms of instruction.

A key concept that we will explore is the commonly held misconception that PBL exists in isolation, divorced from the larger school community and its structures. We will explore the routines, supports, resources, processes, and overarching principles that have helped many educators feel confident in implementing PBL with multilingual students, as well as the central role that a networked community can play in building and sustaining a supportive school culture. Our next brief will go beyond the principles of PBL, presenting the nitty-gritty of what it takes to implement project-based approaches for MLLs in both classroom instruction and supportive school-wide structures and leadership models.

Resources

Many organizations promote and support project-based learning in primary and secondary education. We compiled a list of some of the best: <https://tinyurl.com/Intls-PBL>

References

- Bajaj, M. & Barlett, L. (2017). Critical transnational curriculum for immigrant and refugee students. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 47(1), 25–35.
- Bell, S. (2010). Project-Based Learning for the 21st Century: Skills for the Future. *The Clearing House*, 83: 39–43.
- Handrianto, C. & Rahman, M.A. (2018). Project Based Learning: A Review of Literature on Its Outcomes and Implementation Issues. *LET: Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching Journal*, 8 (2): 110–129.
- Comings, J.P. & Cuban, S. (2007). Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students. *Defining and Improving Quality in Adult Basic Education*.
- Craig, T. & Marshall, J. (2019). Effect of project-based learning on high school students' state-mandated, standardized math and science exam performance. *Journal of Research in Science Education*. 56 (10): 1461–1488.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and Education*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- DeVivo, K. (2022). A new research base for rigorous project-based learning. Jan. 24, 2022. *Kappan Online*.
<https://kappanonline.org/research-project-based-learning-de-vivo/>
- Francis, D.J., Rivera, M., Lesaux, N., Kieffer, M., & Rivera, H. (2006). *Research-based recommendations for serving adolescent newcomers*. Houston, TX: University of Houston, Center on Instruction.
- García, O., & Kleifgen, J. (2018). *Educating Emergent Bilinguals: Policies, Programs, and Practices for English Language Learners* (2nd ed.). New York City: Teachers College Press.
- Huyn, T. (2023). Making Project-Based Learning More Accessible for Multilingual Students. *Edutopia*. Aug. 15, 2023.
<https://www.edutopia.org/article/pbl-multilingual-students>
- Jacob, E., Rottenberg, S., Patrick, S. & Wheeler, E. (1996). Cooperative Learning: Context and Opportunities for Acquiring Academic English. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30(2), 253–280.
- Kirkpatrick (1918). The Project Method: The Use of the Purposeful Act in the Education Process. *Teachers College Record*, 19, 319–335.
- Knoll, M. (1997). The project method: Its vocational education origin and international development. *Journal of Industrial Teacher Education*, 34, 59–80.
- Lesaux, N.K., et al. (2006). Development of literacy. In D. August & T. Shanahan (Eds.), *Developing literacy in second-language learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on language-minority children and youth* (pp.75–122). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Lucas Education Research (2021). [Rigorous Project-Based Learning is a Powerful Lever for Improving Equity](#).
- Moss, D., & Van Duzer, C. (1998). [Project-Based Learning for Adult English Language Learners](#). Washington DC: National Center for ESL Literacy Education.
- The New Teacher Project (2018). *The Opportunity Myth: What Students Can Show Us About How School Is Letting Them Down—and How to Fix It*. <https://opportunitymyth.tntp.org/>
- Suárez-Orozco, C., Qin, D. B., & Amthor, R. F. (2008). Adolescents from immigrant families: Relationships and adaptation in school. In M. Sadowski (Ed.), *Adolescents at School: Perspectives on Youth, Identity, and Education* (2nd ed., pp. 51–69). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Education Press.
- Sugarman, J. (2017). Beyond Teaching English: Supporting High School Completion by Immigrant and Refugee Students. *Migration Policy Institute*.
- Vaughn, S., Martinez, L. R., Linan-Thompson, S., Reutebuch, C. K., Carlson, C. D., & Francis, D. J. (2009). Enhancing social studies vocabulary and comprehension for seventh-grade English language learners: Findings from two experimental studies. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 2(4), 297–324.
- Villavicencio, A., Jaffe-Walter, R., & Klevan, S. (2020). “You can’t close your door here:” Leveraging teacher collaboration to improve outcomes for immigrant English Learners.” *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 97.
- Zhao, Y. & Wang, L. (2022). A case study of student development across project-based learning units in middle school chemistry. *Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Science Education Research*, 4(5).

This Learning Brief was made possible by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the authors.

© Internationals Network for Public Schools. All Rights Reserved.

Text: Marguerite Lukes, Dolan Morgan, Sevana Sammis.
With special thanks to Andrea Kannapell.

Design, Infographics, Photography & Layout: Cora Kobischka

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, or included in any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from Internationals Network.

A full-text PDF of this document is available for free download at <https://www.internationalsnetwork.org/about/#lb2-1>
For inquiries about reproducing excerpts from this publication, please contact cora.kobischka@internationalsnetwork.org.

Suggested citation: Lukes, M., Morgan, D., Sammis, S. (2023). **All Learners All the Time: Project-Based Learning and Equity in the Internationals Network**. Learning Brief: New York City: Internationals Network for Public Schools.