

# 10 tips for planning team-based deeper learning

## What to consider when unit planning with your team

Team-based practices are approaches that leverage multiple adults to create deeper and personalized learning opportunities for students.

**Strategy:** Educators co-plan project-based units that support deeper learning

**Frequency and duration:** Ideally, planning meetings occur weekly or on another predictable timetable (e.g., regular early release days)

**Practice adapted from:** SPARK School at Kyrene de las Manitas

- Core educator team: 1 teacher executive designer, 3 certified teachers, 1 teacher candidate, 1 instructional assistant
- Learners: 100–120 learners in Grades 4–6
- Elements of the Next Education Workforce: Distributed expertise, self-improving teams, learner-centered instruction, authentic assessment

The educator team at SPARK School at Kyrene de las Manitas co-plans project-based units that support deeper learning. Read on to explore 10 tips adapted from their planning practices.

## ▶ Tip No. 1: Carve out dedicated, recurring time for planning

From brainstorming the possibilities to gathering standards and materials, unit planning is a process that takes time. Carving out dedicated, recurring time for planning (e.g., early release days, planning days, recurring team meeting time) can make this process feel more manageable. Keep in mind that you don't need to plan a full unit in one sitting; generating a few clear, actionable steps for starting a new unit or improving an existing one is still progress!

## ▶ Tip No. 2: Use a planning template

Use a unit planning template to ensure learning experiences are building toward student understanding. Plenty of templates are freely available (create a copy of a template inspired by SPARK School's unit planning template [here](#)), and which template you use is less important than ensuring your template includes all of the elements necessary for high-quality project-based learning units (e.g., driving question, standards, objectives) and prompts teams to identify the ways each team member will distribute their expertise in support of student learning.

## ▶ **Tip No. 3: Stuck? Start with science and social studies standards**

Highly relevant, contextualized, project-based units typically require students to draw on knowledge and skills from several content areas. These units are typically interdisciplinary. To jump-start planning for an interdisciplinary unit, consider turning to your science or social studies standards to identify the unit's big ideas. Reading, writing, speaking and listening standards are broad and easy to adapt to many topics, and math concepts often lend themselves to practical application as students generate authentic products showcasing their learning. As a team, determine where content areas will intersect over the course of the unit and the role each educator will play in supporting students with learning.

## ▶ **Tip No. 4: Create space for student choice in culminating projects**

Offering students choice is key to building student agency. Consider how you might offer students choice in culminating projects or performance tasks while still ensuring they demonstrate mastery of the identified standards and understanding of the big ideas. Using a design framework like GRASPS (Goal, Role, Audience, Situation, Product and Standards) or RAFT (Role, Audience, Format and Topic) can help the team think about possible choices. For example, while students may all work toward demonstration of the same standards, their products or formats might differ. Some students might author and record podcast episodes, while some might build websites and others might develop and deliver speeches.

## ▶ **Tip No. 5: Ensure students' work toward culminating projects extends throughout the unit**

Meaningful, project-based learning shouldn't be confined to a single day or occur only at the end of a unit. Projects should be developed and refined over the course of a unit, giving students an opportunity to make meaning from new concepts, "play" with the knowledge, conduct research and work through feedback cycles in service of developing truly exemplary products of their learning.

## ▶ **Tip No 6: Calendar culminating project benchmarks**

Because units unfold over a longer period of time—typically weeks or months—it is critical to calendar benchmarks that lead up to a culminating project due date. These benchmarks are scaffolded, tangible products that contribute to the final deliverable (e.g., first drafts, second drafts and third drafts of a written story; discussion prompts and raw recordings for a podcast production; sketches and prototypes of an invention). For longer units, these benchmarks might be weekly; for shorter units, they might be daily. Calendar benchmarks helps students manage their time and increases the likelihood students submit their best work when it's time to showcase their learning. It helps educators by providing formative assessment data they can use to meet students' needs in real time.

## ▶ **Tip No. 7: Group students with educators based on culminating project attributes**

Consider how the team might focus student support and decrease educator workload during project work time by regrouping students with educators based on a specific dimension of the culminating project. For example, once students make key choices about their culminating project, the educator team might group them by topics (e.g., students researching one topic might work with educator A, while students researching a different topic might work with educator B). Alternatively, the team might group students based on their project product or format (e.g., students developing slideshows work with educator A during project work time, students creating business plans work with educator B). Groupings may remain the same across project work time periods for the full unit, or they may shift dependent on culminating project design and benchmarks (e.g., students may work in topic-specific groups early on while performing research, then transition to format-specific groups later, as they begin creating first drafts).

## ▶ **Tip No. 8: Engage community educators to enrich student learning**

Community educators include volunteers and other community members whose knowledge and skills complement those of professional educators. They provide capacity and insight in service of deepening and personalizing student learning and enrich learning environments by forging authentic relationships, sharing expertise and expanding students' networks. Plan community educator engagement early so that the team has enough time to communicate project goals, coordinate schedules and plan for the community educator's engagement. Incorporate all team members in planning for community educator engagement in order to benefit from the full reach of the team's networks.

## ▶ **Tip No. 9: Plan a learning showcase and celebration**

Students will have spent a significant amount of time and effort creating their culminating projects. Plan how you might make their final showcase an empowering and memorable experience. Identify a date and time when students will showcase their projects to a wider audience (e.g., family, community members, peers, other school staff). Whenever possible, ensure the audience is authentic (e.g., engineers from a local firm might engage with students as they showcase their robotics creations; the principal and vice principal might be among the audience for students' speeches on proposed changes to school policies). Giving students a formal opportunity to showcase their work also offers them the opportunity to practice real-world skills, such as presenting on a topic, answering questions and receiving feedback.

## ▶ **Tip No. 10: Leave space to modify your own plans**

Even the best plans require adjusting as schedules change, learning takes more or less time than the educator team anticipates and new opportunities present themselves. Build space into your unit plans that allows the team to operate in ways that are responsive to these needs.