

Better Together: How inclusive design as a policy process impacts stakeholder understanding, ownership, and engagement in assessment and accountability innovation – Allen County, Kentucky Case Study

APPENDIX A: Youth Participatory Action Research Report

**Teaching for Learning:
Insights from the Allen County Scottsville
Youth Research Team**

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Purpose

For the past several years in the Allen County Scottsville Public School District (hereafter ACS), there has been a strategic reform effort to make project-based learning (PBL) the norm in all K-12 classrooms. While initiated by the administration to provide more vibrant, robust learning experiences for students that enable all ACS students to flourish after high school, this strategic reform effort— from design to implementation— has been purposefully collaborative with a range of school and community stakeholders. As the primary stakeholders of classroom-based learning experiences, ACS students are perhaps the most well positioned to provide direct insight into the quality and equality of project-based learning. In the spirit of collaborative co-design that informs the ethos of the reform, then, making space for authentic student voice was also embedded into the fabric of the district’s ongoing efforts to evaluate and continuously improve the quality and equality of project-based learning experiences and spread.

The ACS HS principal, keenly supportive of both student voice and aware of the need for community co-design and buy-in into any school-level reform effort, recruited students across high school grade levels to be a part of the broader research effort (see accompanying report) to understand better how the PBL initiative was ensuing across the district. Led by their adult research partner, a local professor trained in community-based education research methods, a group of six ACS high school students came together to form the ACS Youth Research Team (ACS YRT).

Over the course of the 2024-2025 academic year, the ACS YRT conducted their own complementary study to the adult study, informed by youth participatory action research, or YPAR—a strand of community-based research. In alignment with YPAR methodology, the students themselves were responsible for designing the study—including the creation of research questions, selection of sample, design of data collection protocols, administration of surveys and interviews (discussed in detail below), and analysis of data.



The ACS YRT was guided by their adult partner, and met on a monthly basis both in person and over zoom to receive research training and work through their study. In the Fall 2025 semester, the students will have multiple opportunities to share these findings with authentic audiences (namely at school board meetings and parent teacher association meetings), with support from their school and district level administration.

In the section that follows, we review the methods the YRT took to answer the following two research questions that drove this study:

1. What is the quality (how good) and equality (how widespread) of hands-on learning in Allen County Scottsville HS school? And relatedly, how is it impacting students' grades?
2. How does the quality of student-teacher relationships impact students' learning experiences in Allen County Scottsville HS? And relatedly, how does the quality of the student-teacher relationship impact students' grades?

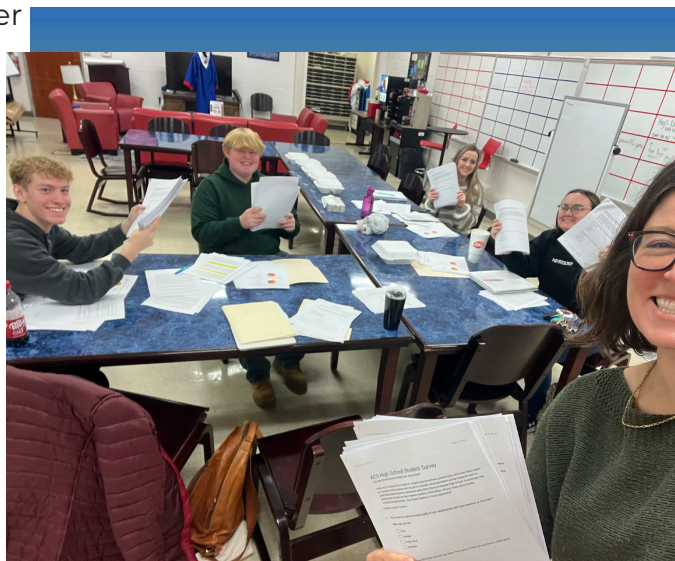
Methods

Data Collection

The ACS YRT spearheaded the design and implementation of data collection, consisting of a mixed method approach including surveys and interviews.

Student Sample

The student survey included both close-ended items (Likert style) and open-ended items. Administered electronically and through hard paper copies that were later input into excel, the survey garnered 288 responses (out of ~879 total students at ACS HS), from students across the grade span (29% 9th grade; 24% 10th grade; 18% 11th grade, and 29% 12th grade.) 49% of respondents were students who had at least one or more AP or dual credit courses, which is reflective of the broader student population of the school. In addition to the survey, 11 students were interviewed in person by the student research team, and the audio files of those interviews were transcribed and analyzed collectively. The interview sample included two 9th graders, seven 11th graders, and two 12th graders; seven males and four females; eight white and three students of color; and anecdotally according to the student research team, this student sample included a range of achievement and overall school engagement levels.



Teacher Sample

The students interviewed eight of their teachers and also transcribed those audio files and collectively reviewed and analyzed those transcriptions. The teacher interview sample included four female teachers, four male teachers, and four out of the eight interviews were with Career Technical Education (CTE) teachers. Of note, then, the sample of teachers interviewed overrepresents CTE versus core teachers with regard to the ACS teacher population. Specifically, within the sample, there were two business/marketing teachers (CTE); two agriculture (CTE) teachers; two social studies/humanities teachers (core); one math teacher and one physics teacher. The students anecdotally reported that all teachers interviewed had been teaching for at least a few years, and were not new teachers.

The teacher survey was also designed by the students, and the principal sent the survey out electronically to the teachers, and it garnered 40 responses from teachers, 71% of whom identified as core teachers, and 36% who identified as CTE teachers.

Approach to Analysis

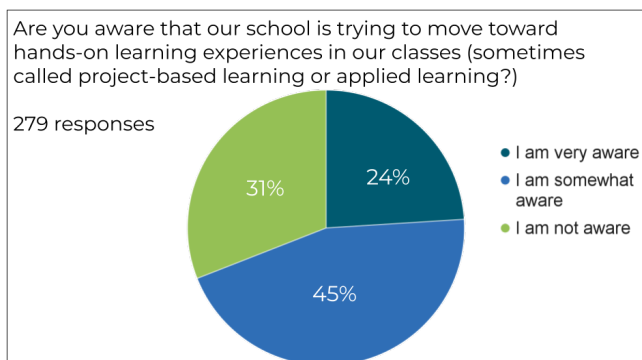
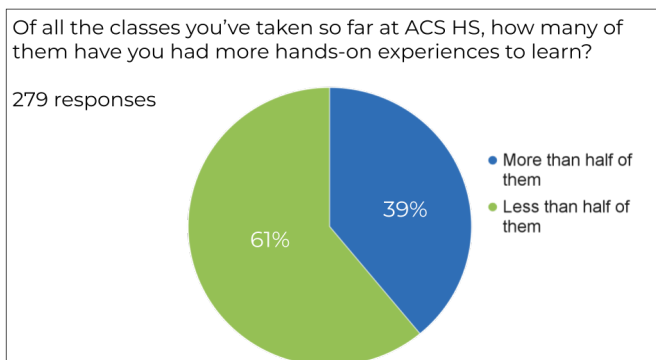
With the various forms of quantitative and qualitative in hand, the ACS YRT met several times over the Spring 2025 semester to read and review the data, and engage in collective sense-making about what the data said. These sessions were again led by Dr. DiGiacomo, adult research partner, but the results that are presented in the following section were insights driven based on the sense-making of the students themselves.

Results

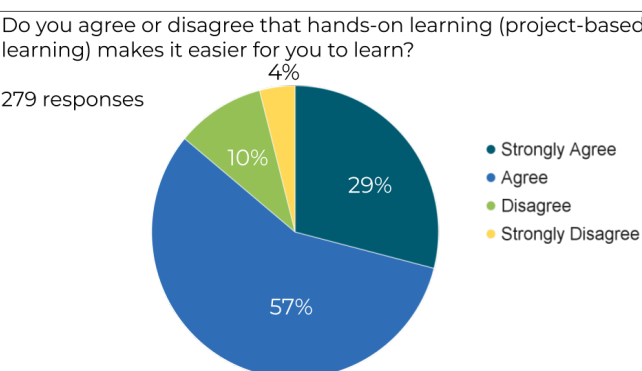
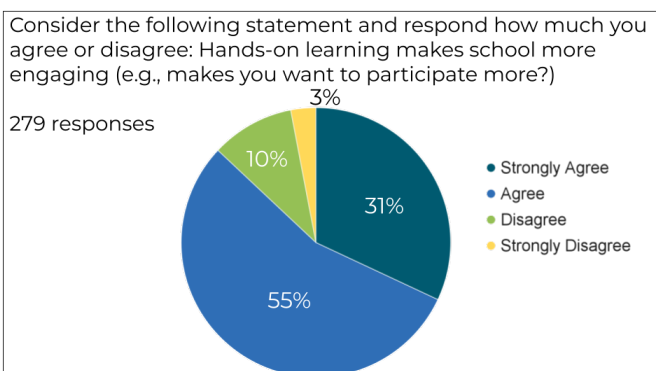
What is the quality (how good) and equality (how widespread) of hands-on learning in Allen Co.-Scottsville HS school?

Research question one examined the quality and equality of project-based learning– what the students themselves tend to call “hands-on learning” or “real world learning”—from the student perspective. Based on analysis of the corpus of mixed-method data, three primary findings resulted in direct response to this first empirical question. After each point below, we provide illustrative examples in the form of either direct interview or survey quotes and/or charts generated from the survey data.

1. Project-based learning opportunities are happening throughout ACS, but not every student is experiencing these opportunities to the same extent or as thoroughly. Further, PBL as an instructional practice is not universally known about by the student population.



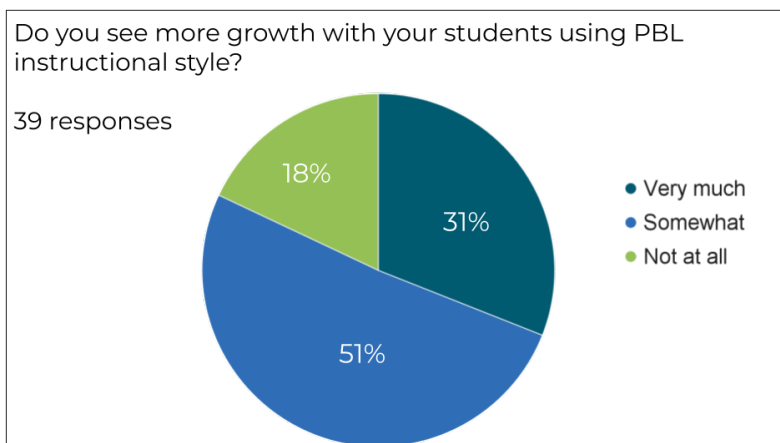
2. ACS High School students who have experienced classrooms rich with project-based learning tend to enjoy it and want more of it because it makes them want to participate more, as well as easier for them to learn.



- Some ACS High School teachers do project-based learning regularly, and others don't. Teachers' preferences for routinizing PBL within their classrooms are varied, but the majority do see at least partial growth in students' performance when they do PBL.

"It [PBL] makes everything 'real' for the students and increases their engagement in the work tremendously."

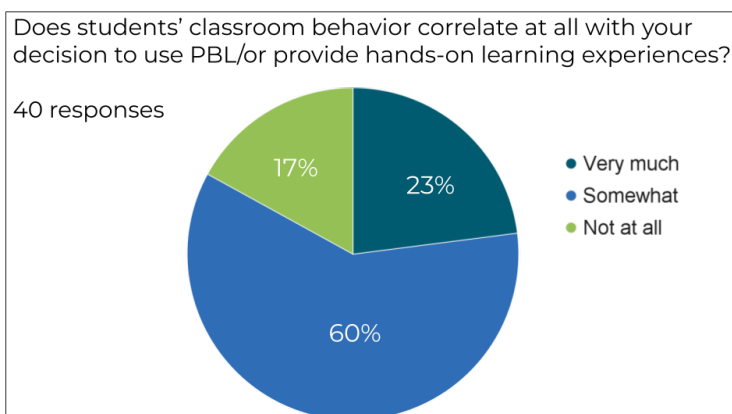
- ACS HS Teacher



- When asked about why they may not do project-based learning, teacher responses centered on issues of student behavior, or because they think they can't necessarily cover everything within their discipline or content when doing so. Of note, the student perspective on this finding is that teachers choose not to center project-based learning in their classrooms because of the time and effort it takes to do so.

"When you give some students an inch, they take a mile. Maybe more than a mile. When you step out of tradition, they feel they have more freedom and some cannot handle the responsibility of being mature and doing what they are supposed to be doing."

- ACS HS Teacher



"I do think that PBL has some benefits, it is just out of my comfort zone."

- ACS HS Teacher

How does the quality of student-teacher relationships impact students' learning experiences in Allen Co. Scottsville HS?

Research question two examined how student-teacher relationships impacted students' learning experiences and performance in ACS High School. Of note, this research question was co-created in addition to the broader research project's focus on PBL and assessment/accountability re-design, because it was of central import to the students' in relation to their schooling experience at ACS. Based on analysis of the corpus of mixed-method data, three primary findings resulted in direct response to this second empirical question.

1. When students know teachers care about them and respect them, they strive to do their best. High-quality student-teacher relationships increase student motivation, academic performance, and classroom engagement. They also make students less afraid to fail, which is essential for good learning.

"I think if I'm having a positive relationship with my teachers, they're more likely to help me along with everything. They're not going to disrespect me if I continue to respect them, so that helps me get things done in my class and makes me motivated to want to be in their classroom."

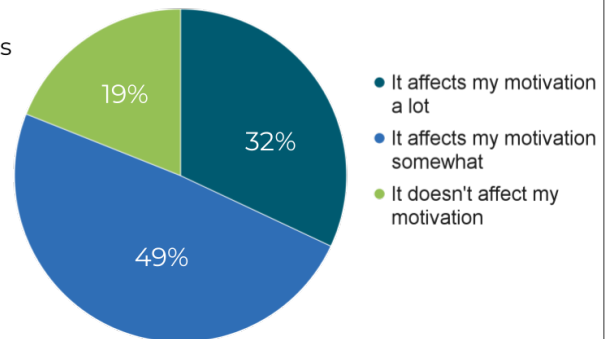
- ACS HS Student

"I have had several students that struggled in school or did not like school, but when I would take time to build a relationship with them or maybe learn what they needed in order to feel like they were ready for school and help them take care of those needs, they were a lot more motivated in my class, and we just had like a mutual relationships of respect for each other, and they did really well after we built those relationships."

- ACS HS Teacher

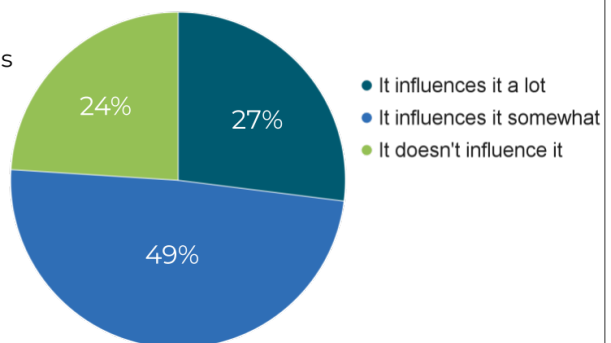
Do you believe that the quality of your relationships with your teachers affects your motivation to participate (e.g., do well) in class?

279 responses



In your opinion, how does the quality of your relationships with your teachers influence your academic performance (aka your grades)?

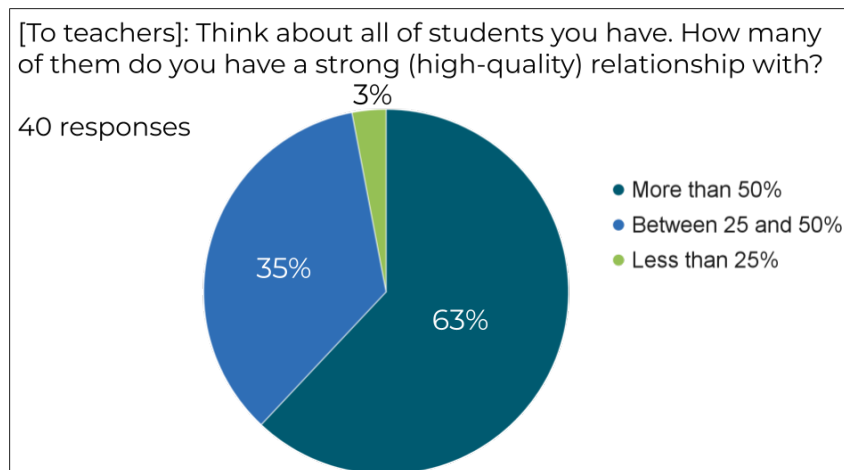
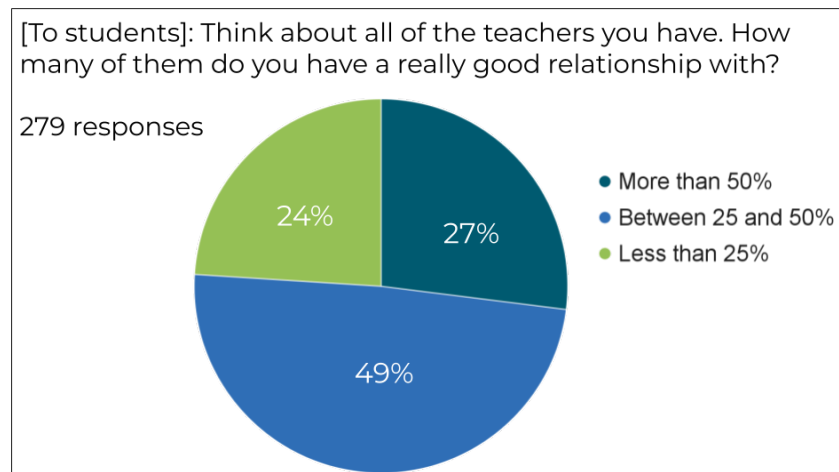
279 responses



"Whenever a teacher is driving me to work harder, it makes me want to. But whenever they talk to me respectfully, it makes me not want to do anything, not very motivated."

- ACS HS Student

2. High-quality student teacher relationships are present in ACS High School, but not universal nor necessarily the majority in terms of frequency of experience. Of note, more teachers, than students, think that they have these high-quality relationships.



3. Teachers that make project-based learning a routine part of classroom learning experiences appear to also be those that have the most and best high-quality student-teacher relationships with their students. Students conjecture that this correlation likely exists because they are also the ones that believe in their students' ability to really learn by making mistakes and working independently and together over time.

"With teacher [X], I am more comfortable and open with them to better understand and ask for help."

- ACS HS Student

"I'm learning the most in class [X] because she's got a very hands-on teaching style, and I really like her."

- ACS HS Student

"I absolutely love hands-on work. It is the best way I learn, and that may be because I ask more questions and get more into it."

- ACS HS Student

Student Research Team Reflections

Throughout the research study process, the ACS YRT was asked to reflect on their own experiences as youth researchers. These reflections took the form of in-the-moment discussions during monthly meetings, as well as more formal solicitations of feedback from outside interests in YPAR (such as the Carnegie Foundation). Below, we share a few illustrative excerpts from these reflections that speak to the ways in which ACS HS students felt about being a part of the broader collaborative effort to make sense of the district's strategic reform efforts.

- “It was very eye opening to how different students learn and also how different teachers like to teach. The best part was being able to feel like I was a part of something that would actually change how everyone teaches and learns.” - ACS HS 11th grade male student
- “Yes because [the research] give you a lot of insight to different perspectives and help you to make learning and education better for others” - ACS HS 12th grade female student
- “I think it is good; to learn about the world and how others think. Research helps with a lot!” - ACS 12th grade female student
- “It was very humbling being a part of this research team seeing how other people choose to learn or teach based on my own learning preferences.” - ACS 10th grade male student

Implications

There are several implications based on the research conducted by the ACS YRT that directly align with the guiding research questions. In relation to research question one, we suggest that:

1. In every class—not just particular CTE or particular Core class—ensure that each unit, or even every other unit, includes a PBL that has been co-designed by the teacher and supported by the distinct instructional coaches. This does not mean that traditional formative and summative assessment need to be removed, but rather that a PBL inspired assessment be woven into the fabric of the end of unit assessment(s).
2. All ACS teachers and staff are briefed on the results of this study, in an attempt to deepen and spread the understanding of student experiences of PBL as well as the continued importance of high-quality student-teacher relationships.

In relation to research question two, we suggest that:

3. In the first week of each semester, teachers should focus on community building in which the students and the teacher take real time to get to know each other. This stands in contrast to the oft-practice of diving directly into content acquisition in week one, without having the time and space to build the safe space for belonging that is a necessary social condition of learning.
4. Given students' request for socially comfortably classrooms, consider integrating professional development sessions (for example, those at occur in early August), led by model in-district pedagogues, that focuses specifically on the importance of student-teacher relationships and how to build relational trust with a range of students, from various backgrounds and ability levels.

All four implications, according to the ACS YRT, would directly contribute to increasing the quality and quality of vibrant and more meaningful learning experiences for the ACS student community.

Concluding Remarks

From the beginning of the ACS district PBL reform effort years ago, district and school level administration has made clear their belief in the capability of their students to both research and report on student-level experiences, and be involved in reform improvement. Soliciting and sharing this student-driven research report makes visible their commitment to student voice and their belief in the intellectual capacities of their student population. Future steps will include the student research team sharing these findings to various stakeholder audiences, as well as the development and sustenance of a principals' advisory council of students that will work with school and district level leadership to collectively evaluate and continuously improve the quality and equality of vibrant learning experiences for all ACS students.





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