Student-Designed Learning Projects
Presentation Audio Transcript

Slide 2: There are many names for student-designed learning projects, and they come in all shapes and sizes. When students complete one at the end of 12th grade, it might be called a senior project, mastery project, personal project, or capstone. In the last year of middle school or elementary school, it might be called a capstone or gateway. Or it might be something more informal, rather than a large project. Some of these projects might be entirely independent and some might be collaborative. Most are quite flexible, and students have choice in content and how to engage in that content. Often, students have to participate in a public presentation where they talk about how they demonstrated proficiency through their learning project. This module will explore some of the common threads of these projects.

Slide 3: The first thing we will consider is all the different names applied to student-designed learning projects. There are vast resources on the topic, including resources below, and we want to be sure that educators understand the synonymous nomenclature. A capstone is a final achievement. When we talk about capstones as student-designed learning projects, we generally see them at the end of student's career at a school. In a K-8 school, a capstone would be in the eighth grade. Senior project is often considered a capstone at the end of a student's high school career. Gateways usually are defined as projects that are completed before a student moves to a new school or new grade level. But student designed learning can happen at any point of the year, and at any point in the students' career. Student designed learning is not limited to gateways and capstones.

Slide 4: Regardless of what they call it, schools should clearly connect their concept of student-designed learning projects to a school's vision, mission, and goals. In personalized systems, these projects allow students to demonstrate proficiency in the most flexible ways. For some schools, the purpose might be for students to demonstrate content proficiencies that they have yet to master in their coursework, while others might use the project as a way for students to demonstrate independent learning and transferable skills. In all cases, one purpose will be to fully engage students in all content and learning choices while holding all students accountable to the same expectations.

Once schools have determined why student-designed learning projects will be an important part of their assessment system, they can begin to organize the design of the project and the elements that are non-negotiable. In large scale projects completed by a full cohort of students as a culminating demonstration, careful consideration should be

given to timelines, preparing students, submission requirements, mentors, formative assessment, feedback loops, and final presentation--and all of these decisions should be connected back to the purpose. For smaller projects, the guard rails of a project will be worked out between the teacher and the student. This is another instance where curriculum is a conversation.

Slide 5: In proficiency-based education, we often say that time is the variable and learning the constant. Students should progress upon mastery to next levels. However, in schools that have formalized systems of student-designed learning projects, time may be fixed. Regardless of how much time a school gives for students to complete their project, it must be sufficient for all students. And, within that big timeline structure, there should be checks along the way, which will help students manage time, an important life skill.

Another support schools can offer students in these projects are tools -- or scaffolding -- to help brainstorm and design. These tools can also be helpful to teachers as they support students. How do teachers create student learning projects? Consider how teacher templates for planning units of study can also be used by students. Oftentimes after the planning process, schools will have students submit a formal proposal that addresses questions about the project. Proposal writing using specific guidelines is a real world skill that many will encounter in college, in career, and as citizens. In the proposal, students will address what they will learn, how they will learn it, and how they will demonstrate their learning.

Slide 6: Most projects are open-ended in terms of what students will choose to learn. Often students write an essential question that will focus their experience. There is also great flexibility in how they will learn; however, some schools want to ensure that students are using a myriad of resources available to them. Some projects require students to consult with experts in the field through phone or in-person interviews, some will require the use of primary sources, and others require a mix of media including print resources, videos, podcasts, and websites. All projects will ask students to examine the credibility and reliability of these sources. Schools need to consider how they want students to record and report out on what they learned from these sources. They often require research papers or reflective writing about each source to ensure students have used viable resources in their learning. The Common Core writing standards address all of these issues directly.

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Slide 7: Schools often require a public presentation for students to demonstrate their learning to the community. These presentations are not only an assessment opportunity -- with an authentic audience -- but also a celebration of learning. Some schools also ask students to create a product of their learning. Students that learned a skill might bring in an artifact that demonstrates that skill. For example, students who learned to weld might bring in a piece of metal art they created. Students who learned how raise chickens might bring in eggs or pictures of themselves making a coop. Students who learned through service or job shadow might bring in letters from the organizations they worked with to verify their participation. If a student engages in a research-based project, the end product might be an informative slideshow, a pamphlet, professional poster, or a research paper.

Presentations themselves might happen during school hours or after school. Students might present to peers, the community, and teachers. The presentation oftentimes serves as an assessment opportunity, although some projects are simply a celebration of learning.

Slide 8: This video is about a "History Day" showcase at a middle school in Western Maine and is an example of the presentation portion of a school-wide student-designed project. Notice that Shannon Shanning -- the last woman speaking -- is talking about working with her population of severely limited students. Student design learning is not just for "the high flyers." It is an avenue to deeper learning for all kids.

Slide 9: Other elements that a school might include in their format for student-designed learning projects include a portfolio of learning or process journals that are checked along the way. To make the assessment of the project more authentic, some schools choose to use community assessors and must consider how to prepare teacher and community assessors so that they understand the rubrics and expectations when evaluating. Schools should also consider how to communicate with their community about the project work students are doing to build buy-in and share success stories and how to build capacity in younger grades for this type of learning and assessment. Finally, some projects may entail interviews with experts or apprenticeships with mentors. Schools may need to devise some supports to help students engage in the necessary outreach.

Slide 10: Ultimately, student-designed learning projects can be tricky to implement but can be a key lever in advancing personalized learning for students. They allow students

to practice the skills and independent learning that will serve them well in college, career, and life.

Slide 11: Thank you for watching. The resources and activities on this page will help you explore further aspects of student-designed learning projects. If you have any questions or want to share additional resources you think might help others, please contact the Center for Collaborative Education at vtclg@ccebos.org.