

INTRODUCING THE PROBLEM

You've got to start somewhere. Finding-- and defining-- a problem is a great place to begin. This guide is a useful tool for teachers and students alike. It will walk you through the process of identifying a problem by providing inspiration on where to look. Then, it will support you through the process of defining that problem clearly.



#1 Big Idea

THINK GLOBALLY

The world is full of problems. It doesn't take long to get inspiration by reading the news or talking with community leaders and local organizations. Whatever big idea you choose to challenge your students with, the key is: Make it real. Make it relevant. Create opportunities for your students to be creative problem solvers.

WHERE TO FIND INSPIRATION

- Start with your curriculum and content standards.
- Find an issue in the classroom, school, or local community.
- Better yet, ask students to share their own concerns about the school or community.
- Investigate: Ask students to interview parents about potential issues.

RESOURCES FOR INSPIRATION:

LISTS OF GLOBAL ISSUES:

- UN List of Global Issues | <https://www.un.org/en/globalissues>
- Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) | <http://www.unicef.org/mdg/>
- UNICEF's Voices of Youth | www.voicesofyouth.org

ACTIVE CAMPAIGNS:

- DoSomething.org | www.DoSomething.org
- CHANGE.org | <http://www.change.org>
- PeaceJam.org | www.PeaceJam.org
- Harry Potter Alliance | <http://thehpalliance.org/>
- End Poverty 2015 | www.endpoverty2015.org/



ACT LOCALLY

Think about the key questions that support the big idea. These questions should be answerable through research and help focus your students' work. Need Help? Have your students try the Project MASH [Get Global](#) Activity.

EXAMPLES:

THINK GLOBALLY: BIG IDEAS	ACT LOCALLY: KEY QUESTIONS
Sustainability	How does our school's water consumption impact our community?
Climate change	How does our fossil fuel use (carbon footprint) impact our community and planet as a whole?
Global Disease Pandemics	How might health care access in my community improve?
Economic	How does the quality of public education affect the local economy? National economy?
Conflict	How do views on race, ethnicity, and nationality contribute to conflicts in our classroom, our school, community, nation, and world?
Identity	How might identifying with a group encourage or discourage bullying? How can we address bullying at our school?
Health and wellness	How does our community's food options affect the health and wellness of my community?

A NOTE ABOUT STUDENT GRADE LEVEL AND ABILITY

Problem-based learning can be adapted for different grade levels and student ability. Based on the above example of water issues, two separate Model Classroom projects – one first grade, one high school – explored local water problems. The first grade project focused on analyzing the water quality of a local stream, comparing their data with another community and publicly presenting these findings. The high school pre-engineering class applied their knowledge related to water issues and engineering principles in order to prototype and design solutions for a local water shortage.



When introducing the problem, focus on designing a *call to action* that charges students to explore resources and develop solutions. Phrasing is crucial. The power of your written words should capture students' hearts and minds, and help them find personal meaning so they will take ownership in the process.

TIPS

- **Start with an action verb.** (Create, Build, Design, Convince) Make it clear that action is required.
- **Make sure the problem is real AND relevant.** Make it something students can personally connect with so they can fully engage in the process.
 - **HISTORICAL NOTE:** Even if the content area is real, it may not be immediately relevant to student's lives. Connect a historic topic to a current-day equivalent.
- **Solutions should not be immediately apparent.** Make sure the solution requires deep research and investigation.
 - **EXAMPLE:** *Design a solution to a local water shortage. (The final action might be prototypes presenting possible solutions or proposals to the local water works.)*
- **Be specific.** Global issues tend to be broad; a specific local issue can help make meaningful connections to the global issue.
- **Be concise.** Capture it in **15-25 words**.

EXAMPLES

- **SUSTAINABILITY:** Investigate your community's impact on a local stream, then share your findings with a local panel of experts.
 - **"The Streamkeepers" project;** Jeanne Muzi 2011-2012, 1st Grade New Jersey.
- **CLIMATE CHANGE:** South Carolina is at risk of a water shortage. iDesign engineering solutions to address the local water shortage.
 - **"Make an Impact" project;** Bryan Coburn 2011-2012, High School, South Carolina
- **CONFLICT:** *Take a Stand on the Land:* Decide if our town should prohibit development on its publicly owned forest, then persuade voters on Town Meeting Day.
 - **"Take a Stand on the Land" project;** Katie Sullivan 2012-2013, 3rd grade, Vermont
- **IDENTITY:** Stewards caring for Sheridan County: Share the history of Sheridan County, then and now, with the community, then take action to preserve it for the future.
 - **"Sheridan County History" Project;** Laurie Graves and Lamont Clabaugh 2012-2013, 3rd grade, Wyoming