

## Chapter 4

# Making Space for Place: Exploring Place-Based Education (PBE) in K–12 Education

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### ABSTRACT

*Research conducted in the last 15 years suggests that Place-Based Education (PBE) has the potential to address many problems found within America's schools including student disengagement, teacher disempowerment in an era of standardized curriculum and testing, and the isolation felt in many communities. This chapter examines challenges in PBE and practices associated with successful K-12 efforts. Barriers to adopting PBE include administrator, teacher, and community resistance, difficulties in identifying and sustaining collaborative efforts, lack of sustained professional development opportunities, and challenges presented by an increased emphasis on educational standards and standardized testing to assess student progress. Strategies to facilitate efforts include effective communication, institutionalizing school and community supports, improving access to high quality professional development opportunities, and aligning PBE curriculum with standards. PBE efforts also require teachers, students, classrooms, schools, and communities to share responsibility for learning.*

### INTRODUCTION

Place-based education (PBE) is defined as learning within the local community of the student. It is designed to promote active citizenship and utilizes hands-on, real world learning experiences that encourage problem solving and foster collaboration. It is a model of learning where children, teachers, and community members extensively collaborate and hold the local social, cultural, and natural environment at the center of K-12 curriculum (Sobel, 2013; Smith & Sobel, 2010). The goal is to blur the line between schools and their local community by integrating local issues and experiences into the curricular experi-

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ences of students (Smith, 2007). Other similar terms often associated with PBE include environmental education, sustainability education, project-based learning, experiential learning, and service-learning. However, PBE can be distinguished from these other models by its broadened emphasis to include issues beyond sustainability and the environment, and its focus on local issues and history as a context for creating service-learning and experiential opportunities for students.

Research conducted in the last 15 years suggests that place-based education has the potential to address many problems found within America's schools. A discouraging report from the annual High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) (Torres, 2013) found that high school students felt a major disconnect from not only from their schools, but their educators and their school's curriculum. They also felt they lacked skills and information to apply in the real world, obtain a higher degree, and have a lasting career. Additionally, many educators today feel that much of the work they do with their students does not originate from them, but rather is controlled and determined by external forces which includes a centralized curriculum and standardized high-stakes testing (McInerney, Smyth, & Down, 2010). National data suggest that up to 50% of new teachers leave the field by their fifth year (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2007), with the standardization of curriculum and focus on high stakes testing contributing to these numbers (Kopkowski, 2008).

Seminal work on place-based education was conducted by the Annenberg Foundation in the late 1990's. The Rural Challenge Research and Evaluation Program (1999a, 1999b) examined case studies of communities and schools in rural America that shifted from didactic learning approaches and standards-driven curriculum to place-based, experientially-focused approaches. Their research revealed that shifting to these models had positive benefits. Their data suggested that communities became more involved and better connected to students, teachers' experienced greater job satisfaction, and students' demonstrated increased academic achievement and better in-school behavior.

## **MAIN FOCUS OF CHAPTER: AN ANALYSIS OF PLACE-BASED EDUCATION (PBE)**

While evidence demonstrates the potential of place-based programs and initiatives, there are few comprehensive resources examining practices in place-based education associated with successful efforts. The goal of this chapter is to explore and integrate what we currently know about place-based educational efforts, limiting our discussion to those offered as part of the K-12 curriculum. Goals of the chapter include:

1. Define place-based education (PBE) and provide a brief overview of its theoretical underpinning and philosophy.
2. Present and analyze research on PBE efforts in an effort to understand the characteristics of effective programs and outcomes for students, teachers, schools, and communities.
3. Consider barriers to adopting PBE including teacher and community resistance, difficulties in identifying and sustaining collaborative efforts, and challenges presented by an increased emphasis on educational standards and standardized testing to assess student progress.
4. Present suggestions regarding supports and strategies needed for the effective implementation of PBE efforts in public K-12 schools.

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